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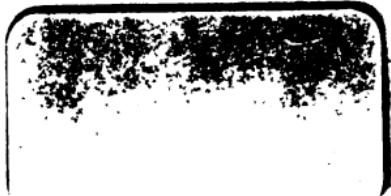
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B E L L E.



Belle had looked up and down the towing-path wondering if he would
ever come that way again. — *Frontispiece.*

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BELLE.

BY THE AUTHOR.

"MISS TOOSLAW'S MENTION IN 'A GIFT'."

"EDUCATION IN 'THE POND'."

"LETTERS ETC."

BOSTON.
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY.

1898.

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B E L L E.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"MISS TOOSEY'S MISSION," "LADDIE,"
"TIP-CAT," "DON," "POMONA,"
"LIL," ETC.



BOSTON:
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY.
1898.

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B E L L E.

CHAPTER I.

THE BANK MANAGER.

And he that stands upon a slippery place
Makes nice of no vile hold to stay him up.

SHAKESPEARE.

A VERY dull house in a country town, with the pavement running so very close outside the dining-room windows that, in spite of the wire blinds and the frequently dingy condition of the panes, the family meals were clearly discernible to inquisitive passers-by. As the arrangements of the Hastings' household, their economies and parsimonies, were greatly discussed in Duckington, it spoke highly for the good manners of the place that there were not constantly rows of spectators on the pavement outside, and that for the most part passers-by contented themselves with a quick sidelong glance out of the corners of their eyes.

I have often observed this sense of honor in very exposed situations like the Hastings' dining-room ; while, where curiosity is more difficult to gratify, people will peep and listen and stand on tiptoe without compunction.

Even Bob Court, the idiot, would not have liked to lean his elbows on the window-ledge and stare in, though the Hastings might have been having goose for dinner, which I can tell you was not very often.

There was a drawing-room behind, not exposed to the public gaze, looking out on a ragged strip of garden the width of the house. The nearer part of this had at one time been kept gay with flowers, with smooth turf and rolled gravel-paths, but it now showed all too plainly that one of the Hastings' economies was the gardener, or rather the absence of one ; though Mrs. Hastings still protested against the family washing coming within flapping distance of the drawing-room window, or unornamental domestic work being performed within sight of it.

Beyond the domain that used to be so gay with flowers were, in old days, rows of trim vegetables, and Mr. Hastings used to pride himself on having the earliest peas and the largest cauliflowers in Duckington. Now there were forlorn cabbage-stalks, and mats of luxuriant weeds, and groundsel enough to supply all the canaries for miles round if their owners were at a loss for that commodity.

Beyond this again there always had been a rough, little bit, the neatest garden requiring a rubbish-heap ; and here Belle had been allowed to reign supreme. She could begin gold-mining operations, or construct battlements, or prepare a wigwam or a fairy palace or waterworks, dig, plant, clear, and level as the whim directed her ; and she was rarely without some direction of the sort of an overmastering vehemence,

carrying her utterly away with it, and making her oblivious of the ordinary rules of daily life, meal-times, bedtime, clean hands and presentable pinafores.

Even that department showed signs of the want of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still — a hand that would lend itself to the most impossible and chimerical efforts, such as digging to reach the central fire or that vein of rich ore that in Belle's excited fancy ran in dazzling lustre underneath, set here and there with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds ; — a voice that was always ready to carry on the child's sufficiently exuberant imaginings, adding a giant here and a fairy there, encrusting the diamonds more thickly, or setting hydraulics at defiance to carry out Belle's waterworks.

'Putting such nonsense in the child's head,' Mrs. Hastings would say ; 'as if there was not more than enough in it already !'

But after dad was gone — he was not really Belle's dad, being no relation at all to the child, but a guardian (save the mark !) — the possibilities of that rough, little patch of ground seemed to have diminished. She had no energy to begin excavating or erecting. Fairyland and gold-mines seemed both equally hopelessly out of reach. It was hardly worth while even to finish mending the old, rustic seat round the trunk of the mossy apple-tree, from whose distorted branches still dangled forlornly the tail of the kite she and dad had been constructing only the day before he went.

He had been sitting on the firmer part of the seat as he tied on that last paper. It was pink, the last

they had of that color, and she was consulting him about some difficulties over spelling. She went to Miss Windrows' then, a very select school for young ladies, principally frequented by the county.

The word in question was 'defalcation,' a word which she had never heard in her life before, though she heard it repeatedly within the next week or two, as is often the case. When a word strikes you as new and uncommon, you are pretty well sure to come across it at every turn.

He had spelt it over several times in a thoughtful way, till Belle came to the conclusion that he was doubtful himself about the spelling, and threw out a sporting suggestion that there might be a 'k' somewhere in the word. Then he laughed and got up, and took a lingering look round Belle's domain, and hung the tail of the kite up in the apple-tree branches, and gave one more dig at the trench that was to bring the water from the canal in some mysterious way up into the garden, and tossed the spade into the corner, and then went away up the garden-path whistling, stopping to contemplate the row of beans that were coming up so strong and sturdy, and on across the freshly mown grass into the house, from whence he was carried to the churchyard a few days later.

He died in the night. An overdose of chloral, the doctor said; and great sympathy was expressed for the widow and son, and every one remembered what a cheery, sociable creature he was, always so light-hearted and hopeful in these dull days. 'Was he in

the habit of taking chloral?' they asked one another. No one had ever heard of his having a bad night, and his health and good digestion were proverbial in Duckington.

So there was unmixed surprise and concern at first, till by-and-by that word Belle had found so hard to spell stole about the place, and people began to talk of serious defalcations at the bank at which Mr. Hastings had been manager for over thirty years.

And then people began to look mysterious and full of meaning when they referred to that *accidental* overdose of chloral, and to treat Mrs. Hastings and her son in a different manner; for, though, of course, no one could feel anything but pity for the widow of the man who was proved to have been nothing more nor less than a swindler, and for his son, who inherited shame and disgrace, it is a different sort of pity to what one feels for a suddenly made widow who has lost a beloved and respected husband, and for a pleasant, popular young fellow, hardly more than a lad, who has lost the kindly guidance of a father's hand. This new pity was less inclined to take the form of a basket of early strawberries and some hot-house flowers left at the door, with low-toned inquiries as to how Mrs. Hastings was, and *very* kind regards.

Indeed, some of the sympathizing neighbors felt pangs of regret over the handsome wreaths that had made such a display at the funeral, and they paid their florists' bills grudgingly.

Mark Hastings had been a boy at the funeral with

red eyes and quivering under-lip, at sight of which the hardest-hearted matron in Duckington was fain to shed tears and wish to comfort him.

During the days that ensued he turned into a stony-faced, haggard, elderly man with dogged, defiant eyes that met the cruel, curious eyes of Duckington with stare for stare. And yet, as every one said, he was treated with the greatest kindness and consideration, and no one understood that that was the worst bitterness to the young fellow.

If he could have hurled himself against the injustice and hardness of the directors ; if he could have flung their kindness and mercy in their faces, and declared he only wanted justice, it would not have been half so bitter.

If there had been a doubt or flaw in all the damaging evidence against the dead man's character that built itself up so impregnably during those days ; if there had been the least thing to catch at and declare before the world, ' You may have tons of evidence, but this crumb of mine outweighs them all and proves them false,' Mark Hastings would have faced the world like a lion and vindicated his father's character.

But there was no doubt. The blindest and most prejudiced advocate was bound to confess that for years a systematic course of swindling had been going on, only sheltered from detection by the unbounded confidence that one and all placed in the manager. It was in vain that Mark urged that the comparatively quiet, unassuming style of living and

domestic habits of his father gave no scope for the expenditure of such large sums. This last stronghold was knocked to pieces by the revelations of gambling on the Stock Exchange, risky investments, hazardous speculations, growing more and more wild and reckless as time went on, and only some great stroke of luck could cover the losses that time must otherwise inevitably reveal.

After that came out Mark's face settled into the gray rigidity that became habitual to it.

If he could have gone clean away and battled out his life among other people who did not know all about it, even if it had meant starvation and endless drudgery, the youth and hope would not have died out so completely. But there was Mrs. Hastings to think of; and when old Mr. Huxley, the estate agent, offered him a situation in his office, Mark, after refusing it savagely and rudely, accepted it sullenly, making the kind, old man feel that what he had innocently supposed was a benevolent offer verging on generosity and some people added quixotism, as he did not at all require another clerk, was really a coarse and vulgar act of insolent patronage.

Mark did all he knew to make the situation as menial and degrading as possible; waited on the other clerk, relieved the errand-boy of sundry fetchings and carryings, swept out the passage and shook the mat instead of the woman whose duty it was, especially doing such work when carriages with former acquaintances were driving past; and was offensively scrupulous in the matter of small change and postage-

stamps, tediously accounting for every farthing. Altogether he made Mr. Huxley rue the hour when he made the offer.

The house in High Street belonged to Mrs. Hastings, and as houses were not in demand at Duckington, and a good many repairs would have been necessary to put it into lettable condition, it was decided that they should remain there, reducing their establishment to one dirty-faced girl, who, although she was supposed to do the work of the three tidy maids she superseded, seemed to have more time than they ever found for gossiping at the back-door with all and sundry.

Mrs. Hastings relapsed into querulous, invalid ways, always having some utterly unimportant trifle to vex and worry over, so that the bitter disgrace and despair that was crushing Mark's heart was as nothing by the side of a cracked tea-cup or the draught from the staircase window.

Belle was too young for a confidante, and besides, as I must explain later, Belle was part of the great trouble ; so Mark was thrown back upon himself, and had no one to advise and comfort him in those dark hours when he called up the memory of his father and put him on his trial.

Such a kindly, pleasant face, with a sparkle of fun in the eyes and a comic, little twitch at the corner of the mouth, as of one who saw the amusing side of life, an easy-going manner, and an infectiously light-hearted laugh.

When Mark could conjure him up as he was in life,

or even as he had lain in death, with the calm of utter content on his sleeping face, it seemed entirely impossible to believe the long story of deceit and dishonesty.

'I could have declared that I knew every thought of his heart,' poor Mark would say, brought face to face with that fact in life. That even the heart nearest to ours may be an unknown country full of secret motives, undreamt-of impulses, unconfessed thoughts! Perhaps when we know even as we are known by Him unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, some of the mysteries of this unintelligible world may be explained, and *tout comprendre sera tout pardonner.*

CHAPTER II.

MARK'S INHERITANCE.

A man I am crossed with adversity.

SHAKESPEARE.

I SAID in my last chapter that Belle could not be a confidante in Mark's trouble because she was so young, and, moreover, was part of his great trouble; for Mr. Manners, Belle's father, when he died, had commended his little girl to the guardianship of his old friend Hastings, and had left to him also in trust for her all the money he had laboriously scraped together during his hard-working life; a sum altogether which, with liberal allowance for the years of her minority and education, would form quite a considerable fortune when she came of age.

Mrs. Hastings used to discuss with her more intimate cronies what would be her duty when the girl was grown up; whether she ought not to take her up to London to introduce her into society, or whether Lady Martingale, the member's wife, would consent to present her at court and chaperone her in the higher circles, where, Mrs. Hastings was fain to confess, she herself might not find herself quite at home after twenty years' vegetating at Duckington, even if, as her friends doubted, she had ever had much experience in such bright spheres.

'I'm sure it is the least Lady Martingale can do,' Mrs. Hastings used to say, 'after all John did for Sir Miles at the last election. Every one says he would not have had a chance of the seat if it had not been for John's indefatigable exertions ; and I don't think a brace of pheasants and an invitation to a garden party every summer is any adequate return.'

But all these bright expectations were at an end now. Lady Martingale was not likely to introduce the ward of a swindler into society, and, worse still, the object of such introductions had vanished with the chance of attaining them, for there was no heiress to make her *début*, but only a penniless, little, dark-eyed girl, whose face was likely to be her only fortune, and that, from all appearances at present, a very poor one.

Yes, Belle's money had been made away with along with the rest, and the mere fact that there was no one to take the child's part and make a stir about the wrong that had been done her, made it more intolerable to Mark, and he could in no way echo his mother's tearful thankfulness that the child was too young to understand anything about it, and that the old uncle who used to write and ask about her sometimes had died the year before.

He grew to shrink from the very sight and sound of the child, who before that had often been his pet and playmate ; the sound of her step on the stairs or her voice about the house worried and fretted him, and he would often get up and go away when she came into the room, or wander about aimlessly on his

return from the office in the evening, so as not to be in till after the child's bedtime.

'Are you angry with me, Mark?' the child asked once, with a quivering lip and big, shining eyes. She had followed him out into the garden, where he had gone to escape her, and he had given an expression of irritable misery as the little figure appeared on the gravel-walk that had not yet lost its trim, cared-for look.

He caught her up in his miserable, young arms and carried her to the old apple-tree, where the tail of the kite still hung.

He could not speak at first, his breath came so thick and fast as if he had been running very quickly; and she put her arm round his neck and watched the kitten making wild leaps at the end of the kite's tail, which hung tantalizingly just out of reach.

'Angry with you?' he said at last. 'I think, little Belle, you are the only person in heaven and earth that I am not angry with.'

And Belle hugged his head close and rubbed a soft cheek against his, and said, 'Poor Mark! dear Mark!' But she could no more understand his trouble than the kitten could, who had left off its futile attempt to reach the kite's tail, and was climbing up the spade which lay in the corner, resting against the wall, where a vanished hand had tossed it.

If Belle was the only person Mark was not angry with, the position did not do her much good, for he avoided her as much as possible; and when she could not or would not be avoided, all the pleasant, easy-

going good-fellowship between them was quite gone, the petting and teasing, the romping and wild games that made her such a tomboy, Mrs. Hastings used to say.

He would play with her now if she begged and entreated, but a very little of such play was enough for Belle, for children soon find out when it is only the outward mask of a playmate they have to do with, while behind there is a careworn, preoccupied person whose mind is full of other things, and who hardly knows who wins or who loses the game, forgets to take up the cards he has won at Beat-my-neighbor, and, if he pays any attention at all to his moves at Halma, carefully moves to the advantage of his adversary.

The merest baby child does not care to play on such terms, and Belle was not a baby, being seven years old soon after Mr. Hastings died, an age more full of thought and understanding than we often give it credit for.

So Belle retired more and more to her own domain at the end of the garden, which she had quite to herself now, without the sympathizing companion of former days who entered into all her plans and imaginings, and without the occasional inroads of mad-cap Mark, who was gone as completely as his father, and who in former days would descend upon her like a whirlwind and upset all her arrangements, though always inaugurating something fresh and delightful in their place; put her up in the top branches of the apple-tree and pretend to leave her, or threaten to

toss her over the wall at the bottom of the garden right into the canal.

The only visitor she ever had now was Amelia, the maid-servant, when she had been reproved for gossiping at the back-door or was in the middle of some job more than usually uncongenial, so that she required a little recreation to support her under the burden, when she would come down the garden with a blacklead-brush in her hand and a smear from the same on her nose, or with a dirty duster tucked into the band of a dirtier apron, and mount on the earth-work that Belle had constructed to bring her face above the level of the wall and scour the towing-path up and down for objects of interest.

The earthwork always required a good deal of restoration after such visits from Amelia, not being constructed to sustain such solid worth, so Belle regarded her visits with mixed feelings; and, indeed, they were not of very frequent occurrence, as the towing-path did not offer much that was amusing to Amelia, and the chaff of the occasional bargees was a bit rough even for her taste.

'Whatever can you find to look at?' she would say to Belle, who in those lonely days would spend hours on her earthwork, leaning her elbows on the part of the wall where, by arduous labor and with many cut fingers and scratches, she had removed the bits of glass that bade defiance to any intruders from the towing-path. 'There ain't nothing but them 'orrid barges with them fellers as is full of their imperence.'

Perhaps the dark, serious child's face looking down from the top of the wall did not provoke the same 'imperence' as Amelia's smudged countenance; but there was an endless fascination to Belle in the gayly painted barges, whose crude reds and blues and yellows were in gaudy contrast with the grimy interiors, of which she caught a glimpse now and then, and the dirty raggedness of their inhabitants — dull, weary-looking women, holding the tiller; surly, unshaven men, plodding along doggedly on the path behind the patient, long-suffering, raw-boned horse straining at the tow-rope; half-clad, gypsy-looking children rolling about on the coal, which was the principal freight, and being scolded and sworn at in shrill tones by their mothers and in deeper accents by their fathers.

She grew to know some of the barges by sight, and there was one young woman who looked out for her, and made her little chocolate-colored baby kiss its dirty hand to her.

She knew some of the horses too, and for some of them she made preparation for refreshment on the way — groundsel and milk-thistle, of which the garden produced a luxuriant crop; though it often happened that the driver was too surly and ill-tempered, and sometimes too drunk, to take any notice of the bunch of green that fell at his feet from the garden wall.

When there were no barges passing, Belle's imagination supplied their place on the dull, leaden waters of the canal with all manner of gay craft, fairy or

classical or historical or fashionable, or a judicious mixture of any or all, as her fancy and the books she had been reading dictated, and she peopled the muddy towing-path with gallants and courtiers, robber chieftains and fairy princes, in interesting variety.

Sometimes she got a little mixed between the real and the imaginary, and if she had been suddenly wafted from that crumbling earthwork to a witness-box, with a keen-eyed counsel to cross-question her, and twelve stolid British jurymen awaiting the words from her lips to decide the fate of some culprit in the dock, I doubt if anything like the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth could have been drawn from her.

For instance, on one occasion, when a brilliant Elizabethan pageant had been passing by, conveyed in galleys of the Roman period, some of which, I am afraid, were propelled by steam—but these are details—one of the gallants, clad in a scarlet blazer, and with boating trousers cut short at the knees—an unusual dress at that time, one would have thought—looked up and laughed as he passed, and tossed up a rosebud he had stuck in his coat.

It certainly was not all fancy, for she carried that rosebud when she went in to tea, and Mrs. Hastings asked where she got it from. And she put it in water in a doll's teapot, and kept it till it was quite dry and brown, and then Amelia swept it away into the dust-pan, and Belle had one of her occasional outbursts of passion in consequence, and screamed and stamped and threw herself about till she was

quite exhausted. 'One of her tantrums,' Amelia called it, and Mrs. Hastings alternately coaxed and scolded.

But Mark would not have her punished, and even after hearing the cause of the storm, told with convulsive sobs that shook the child all over, went out and looked carefully, but in vain, in the dust-hole for the lost treasure, which certainly had a value, if for no other reason, by proving that Maréchal Niel roses are not such modern improvements, but were known in the time of good Queen Bess.

He brought home a beautiful rose for her next day, having walked several miles to secure it for her; but it was not the same, and though she thanked him and made much of the rose, and put it in one of the drawing-room vases, she hardly looked at it after the first five minutes; and he found it next day dead, for she had forgotten to put any water in the vase.

She did not happen to be at her post of observation on the wall a few days later, when that same Elizabethan gallant, this time in no gay company—though that, indeed, had been the case on the former occasion—and dressed in ordinary attire, passed by on the towing-path, and looked up at the garden wall.

'That was where that queer, little kid with the big, black eyes was staring, as if she could see the seven wonders of the world,' he said to himself.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAINWARING GIRLS.

My only books
Were woman's looks,
And folly's all they 've taught me.

MOORE.

ON the other side of the High Street at Duckington, opposite to the Hastings' house, lived the Mainwarings — ‘Dr. Mainwaring,’ as the brass plate on the door informed passers-by, and as the red lamp over the small surgery-door farther on, continued to proclaim through the night.

That dreary morning when Mr. Hastings slept that profound sleep from which no breakfast-bell nor fretful reminder of the lateness of the hour from his wife could rouse him, Dr. Mainwaring had been summoned, and had run across in dressing-gown and slippers and one of the girls’ garden hats, almost before Mark and his mother had realized the awful solemnity of the occasion, which allowed no thought of the doctor’s grotesque appearance.

Mark and the Mainwaring girls had been great friends till this day. There were four of them, fat, good-natured, untidy and gossiping, kind-hearted and lazy, which does not sound an attractive mixture of qualities, but as a matter of fact, when well mixed

and judiciously proportioned, and joined to pleasant exteriors, fresh healthy complexions, bright smiling eyes, and an undisguised liking for yourself, are very endurable.

They all of them liked Mark very much, but so, for that matter, they did all young men and most girls. Bessie, the youngest, even had a slightly sentimental feeling regarding him which was not quite unreciprocated.

There was no deception about them. Their faults were all on the surface, and they acknowledged their own and each other's quite openly.

'Lucy, you *are* lazy. Here, Mark, just turn her out of that arm-chair or she'll grow into it.'

'Now, Mark, don't come in here. The room is like a pigsty. There never was such an untidy family.'

'Come in, do, Mark, and tell us a bit of news. We're sick for a good gossip.'

He had seen them in the most *négligé* of home life, curling their fringes, darning their stockings, writing their love-letters. They had a code of signals by which they could call him over, if there was a bit of interesting gossip to impart, or they were going to make toffy or roast chestnuts or wanted to show him their new hats.

They were sincerely sorry for Mark when his father died, though they rather revelled in the details of the sad event, which they imparted to interested listeners at a succession of subdued afternoon tea-parties, at which they were heartily welcomed, as, from their

house being exactly opposite the Hastings' and Dr. Mainwaring having been called in, they were more accurately informed in the matter than any one else in Duckington ; and it is a great thing in a country town to have the latest information on any subject, even if it is a painful one.

Nor was their sympathy or affection for Mark any the less because when those ugly rumors about his father began creeping about in Duckington, they received them with open ears and passed them on with open mouths.

They could not the least understand Mark's overwhelming sense of disgrace and misery. If it had been any one nearly connected with themselves, even Dr. Mainwaring himself, I think they would hardly have felt more than a certain sense of importance, so differently are people constituted.

They were puzzled to think why Mark kept away from them. It was all very well that first week when the blinds were down, and it was proper for people to stop indoors, and only to be as well as could be expected in answer to inquiries. Even then, they thought, he might have run across in the evening after dark ; it was not like strangers, and they were such old friends.

But afterwards his avoidance of them seemed downright unkind and inexplicable. They were so awfully sorry for him, and he knew it, and might have reckoned on their sympathy ; and one would have thought they were the first he would have come to in his trouble. But no ; they heard all about Mr. Hast-

ings' misdeeds from other people ; every one in the place seemed to know about it before they did, and they were no longer the centre of those afternoon tea-parties, with the latest information to impart, but were in the inferior position of listeners, with no further details to contribute.

The old signal of the bit of ribbon tied to the tassel of the blind, which had never failed to bring him in former days, was now entirely disregarded ; and when Bessie tried a pea-shooter against the window where he had been clearly visible a minute before, the blind was drawn down instead of the storm of return peas which would in former days have replied to such a challenge. It was a long time before they got used to this new state of affairs, to the blank want of response in the opposite house, to Mark turning on his heel when they otherwise would have met in the street, and to his being in too great a hurry for more than a word and a nod when he ran right up against one of them and there was no escape.

They made one or two attempts to get at him through Belle ; but the child had never been much of a favorite with them, being what they called 'old-fashioned,' and having all sorts of notions and fancies that they could not in the least enter into, and a way of asking questions which they were quite unable to answer.

So, after one or two attempts at having her to tea and plying her with raspberry jam, and taking her out for walks, with chocolate to fill up pauses in the

conversation, or to create a diversion when questions became embarrassing, the Mainwarings gave it up as a bad job.

It was just then that Rose got engaged to a young doctor in the neighborhood, so there was something else to be thought of; and after that the house at the end of High Street which had stood empty so long was taken and thoroughly done up, and taken, moreover, by an elderly clergyman who took pupils and prepared them for Sandhurst or the universities. Now only reflect on what this signified. A succession of youths open to any amount of tennis and boating, picnics, impromptu dances, and mild, harmless flirtation; so that the Mainwaring girls had generally one or two in tow, and flannel-clad forms with rackets in hand were frequently to be seen lounging on the Mainwaring door-steps, or leaning on the railings that kept the Mainwaring dining-room more secluded from the public gaze than was the case with the house opposite.

Censorious remarks were made on these goings-on by some of the elderly ladies in Duckington, and here let me chronicle that it was the married ladies who were far the most severe and spiteful, and notably the ones who had daughters of their own. It is quite a fallacy to imagine that the old maids are the most spiteful and scandalous members of a community. Give me the married ladies for double-distilled venom!

Old Miss Partlet, who was otherwise what you would call a typical old maid, was much less inclined

to be critical than Mrs. Butler, who had daughters of her own flirtatiously inclined, so that you would have thought she would be merciful to others, in the hope of mercy being meted out to her girls.

But she was loud in her comments on the goings-on of those Mainwaring girls, and even once took upon herself to speak to Mr. Caxton on the subject, as she was quite sure he did not know of his pupils being at Dr. Mainwaring's morning, noon and night.

She came off from that interview with a strange feeling of having been snubbed ; and yet Mr. Caxton had listened to all that she said with his usual courtly politeness and grave look of attention, and that interrogative 'Yes?' which was so enigmatical.

She did not see the little twinkle in his eye as he courteously showed her out and opened her umbrella for her, for it was a wet afternoon when the spirit moved her to testify against the Mainwaring girls.

If she had seen that twinkle she could the better have understood why she never liked Mr. Caxton afterwards, which sudden change of opinion about him made her daughter shrewdly suspect that he had told her plainly to mind her own business, which was not so.

As a matter of fact, he had taken the measure of the Mainwaring girls from the first with great accuracy, and he reckoned them as one of the advantages Duckington offered, along with the good water, gravel soil, and convenient neighborhood to the river. They were good-natured, pleasant, unaffected girls, who would take the lads easily through their first

attack of flirtation, which they must get over just like the measles.

It does them all the good in the world to fancy themselves in love with a nice, sensible girl several years older than themselves, who will put up with their cubbishness and conceit. Of course, now and then the lads take the infection a little more severely ; and there was one young fellow whom Mr. Caxton had known in former years, who at eighteen had married his tutor's daughter, a woman twice his age, and had ruined his career, which should have been brilliant ; alienated his family, which was aristocratic and ambitious ; and had lived happy ever after in the most contrary way in spite of every one's dark prognostications.

But this was a very exceptional case, and as a rule they loved — if this calf-sentiment can be dignified with the name of love — and then rode away, and their vows of eternal constancy hardly lasted longer than the cigar they smoked in the railway carriage as they journeyed away from Duckington.

Of course there was the other side to be considered — whether the girl might not feel it a bit too deeply ; but Mr. Caxton was an old bachelor, and inclined to be cynical about women's feelings, though no doubt there was some exquisitely sweet, ridiculously sentimental memory far back behind all those years of dry-as-dust coaching. There is generally such a deposit under an erection of cynicism.

So Mr. Caxton tolerated what Mrs. Butler called 'the goings-on' at Dr. Mainwaring's, and the society

of these amiable youths consoled the Mainwaring girls for the loss of their old friend and playfellow, Mark, who, though it was quite by his own fault, felt himself left still more hopelessly out in the cold when he saw those prosperous, light-hearted, young fellows having such good times over the way, where he used to reign supreme.

Belle was not much given to contemplating life from the front windows of the house, though she was never tired of doing so from her perch by the garden wall, or else perhaps she might have seen the Elizabethan gallant again, seeing that he often passed along the street when the autumn rains had made the short cut along the towing-path muddy and unpleasant. He looked out once or twice for the little, dark-eyed child watching, like a very youthful Lady of Shalott, 'shadows of the world appear' along the muddy towing-path and turbid waters of the canal; but she was not there; and then, as I have said, he took to going the other way, and walked past the front of the Hastings' house, without realizing that the garden behind led down to the towing-path, and was the one where the dark-eyed, little girl was watching.

Indeed, I think he had forgotten all about her by that time, and as he passed along High Street he was more inclined to look at the opposite house, where one or other, and often all, of the Mainwaring girls were generally to be seen at the windows, ready at the slightest excuse — which, of course, soon offered itself — to exchange salutations with this pleasant, bright-faced youth.

Belle was absent from her watch-tower in consequence of a bad cold, which Mrs. Hastings, rather irritably resenting any one encroaching on her own special domain of invalidism, attributed, and perhaps justly, to stopping about in that horrid, damp garden, instead of running up and down and playing about, as most little girls would.

‘And Mark in such a fuss over the child, too ! One would think, to hear him, that a child had never had a cough before or got a little bit feverish with a cold. *I* might be at death’s door before he would notice that I had anything the matter with me,’ she would say, with a little hack in the throat at which she felt any really affectionate son would have taken alarm. ‘And I am quite sure he does not believe in the terrible nights I have.’ Which I am afraid was true.

So it was a long time before Belle went back to her post on the wall ; and it was not till the spring that she renewed her acquaintance with the donor of the rose, whom she thought of still a good deal, but who was getting a little bit vague and mixed up with Sindbad the Sailor and the Red Cross Knight and various other heroes out of books, which Mark had managed to get for her to relieve the monotony of that long, dull winter.

It was on a blustering March day, with a fresh southwest wind blowing, ruffling even the sluggish waters of the canal into little, mimic waves, and tossing Belle’s dark hair across her eyes, and rooting out dead leaves from snug corners where they had

lain quietly all the winter, making the poor, dry things dance and flutter with a ghastly sort of merriment.

It was after a gust of wind that had nearly upset her equilibrium, and had fairly blinded her with a tangle of dark hair across her face, that, on recovering herself, she found that her Tam-o'-Shanter had been blown off down on to the towing-path, perilously near the water, and was being rescued by some one, who returned it to her politely on the end of his stick.

This was how Belle and Jerry—for that she discovered to be his name—renewed their acquaintance, and how she realized that he was a living person of the nineteenth century, who spoke English of the present day even with a mixture of quite up-to-date slang, and did not give vent to such expressions as ‘By my Halidom!’ or ‘Gramercy!’ who did not quaff a flagon of Malmsey, but spoke of the beer at the ‘George’ with discerning criticism, and, on his own showing, partook of chops and steaks, instead of venison pasties, barons of beef, or peacocks brought to the board with tail erect.

And yet to the end of their acquaintance, which was not yet, there was always a spice of the Elizabethan about Jerry in Belle’s eyes, even in ordinary modern evening-dress, which is certainly as entirely unpicturesque and unheroic a style of dress as it is possible to conceive.

Belle was naturally a very shy child. In former days, when visitors were every-day occurrences at Mrs. Hastings’, and the small heiress was a subject of interest, Belle used continually to be sent for, called

away from one or other of her entralling games, and had to submit to hasty combing of hair and sponging of grubby little hands, and donning of ‘company’ pinnafores, to go into the drawing-room, where she would stand with her toes turned in and her lips pushed out and her brows drawn together into a most repulsive scowl, which made the ladies who kissed her grudgingly presented cheek and held her unwilling hand inwardly think that it was lucky there was some gilding for such an unattractive, little pill.

But Jerry had a special genius, possessed by a happy few, of restoring shy, embarrassed people to their sober senses, and after that little interview over the Tam-o’-Shanter, Belle and Jerry became quite warm friends. He never failed to look out for her directly he was round the turn of the towing-path which brought him in sight of the garden wall, and he passed that way regularly every day except Sunday; and no stress of weather could keep her from being at her perch watching for him at the appointed time, generally with a little bouquet of any humble flowers the garden could produce, often partaking of the character of weeds, pimpernel and eyebright and such-like, which he dutifully placed in his buttonhole instead of the gardenia or stephanotis or dainty bunch of lilies that was there before he turned the corner.

It is difficult to realize the extent to which this gay, bright-faced youth grew to occupy the thoughts, waking and sleeping, of the solitary, shy, imaginative child.

In other circumstances the feeling she concentrated on him would have been diffused among half-a-dozen other objects — a doll, a big brother, a dog, a governess, a family of rabbits, a desk with a lock and key and a secret drawer. We most of us can recollect something that was the object of out childish adoration, only with most children it is, happily, not exclusively confined to one person or thing ; not all the eggs are put in one poor basket, to be knocked over by the first careless elbow.

But Belle had no distractions. She had never cared for dolls ; she had no live pets, the only animal about the place being a large, solemn tabby cat, who had a sublime indifference, bordering on contempt, for the human race. Mrs. Hastings' querulous selfishness repelled the child, and Mark's spasmodic outbursts of miserable affection frightened her ; and the advances of the Mainwaring girls, with their accompanying raspberry jam and chocolate, did not appeal to her as they would to many children.

So in Belle's unoccupied mind Jerry had a little fane devoted entirely to his worship, a devotion compared to which many of the most passionate loves of later years might show but poorly, and which perhaps can be most worthily compared to a dog's wonderful affection for his master, with a touch of the self-devotion of a mediaeval nun.

So when, one July day, he announced that he was going off next week to Scotland, and should not be coming that way again, the feeling produced in the child was something very nearly akin to despair.

Their intercourse had meant very little to him — just a few good-natured words tossed carelessly to a quaint, little, serious child who dropped from the wall a rubbishy bunch of flowers that he put in his button-hole for a joke. He hardly gave a thought to her the rest of the day, which was filled up with all the interests and occupations and pleasures that most young lives contain ; and now he announced his departure very lightly, almost cheerfully, with half his mind full of the preparations for his journey and plans for the future.

‘Shall you never come any more?’ asked a very trembling voice from above ; and, looking up, he saw eyes bigger than ever with the gathering tears.

Jerry could not bear tears. ‘Never’s a long day,’ he said. ‘Never fear, little one. I shall come back some day. So don’t quite forget me.’

‘I shall never forget you,’ she said with such a tragic, little voice that he smiled to himself as he walked away, and sighed too, and wished that his mother could have the child to make her ‘happy and jolly, as little kids ought to be.’

And Belle crouched down behind the wall and cried till she was sick, and went indoors with such a white and woebegone little face that even Mrs. Hastings, who was not quick at noticing other people’s symptoms, remarked on it and drew Mark’s attention to it.

‘I really think, Mark, that child is not right in the head. She mopes about all day by herself, and if any one speaks to her, jumps nearly out of her skin

and looks quite idiotic. It's so dreadfully difficult to get any one into Earlswood, and wants so much influence and costs so much in postage and having cards printed, or else —'

But here Mark's patience, never a very good wearing article, gave way, and he flew out at his mother in what she described as his usual brutal and unreasonable manner.

She had never suggested getting Belle into Earlswood ; he could not pretend that she had. All she had said was quite the other way, about the difficulty and expense of getting any one into the place. So why he should have flown to the conclusion that she meant to send Belle there perhaps he could explain, for she was sure she could not.

When his mother got into one of these argumentative and highly logical conditions, there was nothing for Mark but to endure it as best he could, which I am afraid was not always very well ; and Belle was so abstracted and absent-minded and heavy-eyed at tea, that it did not need Mrs. Hastings' meaning looks and coughs to draw his attention to the child, who was evidently miles away from the piece of bread and butter that lay untouched on her plate, or the weak tea that was running in a gentle stream from her cup on to her pinafore.

Mark had promised himself a walk that evening, but he made up his mind now that he would stop at home and amuse her ; but the sacrifice of his walk was quite thrown away, for Belle would play at nothing ; she would not be read to or talked to ; she

would not even condescend to toffy-making, though Mark spent sorely begrudging pence on the materials for the concoction, and, long before her usual bed-time, she elected to go to bed.

She was not really sleepy, as Mark felt sure at the time, and he was confirmed in his suspicion by a glimpse he got later in the evening, through the open door of Belle's room, of a little white figure perched up in the window, with its knees drawn up to its chin, and the moonlight making the small face among the tumbled hair look as white as the night-dress she wore.

'Never is a long day,' she was saying to herself, 'but I will never forget him.'

CHAPTER IV.

SPENDING A LONG DAY.

So dark a mind within me dwells,
And I make myself such evil cheer.

TENNYSON.

LONG days have very different meanings. There were the long days Mrs. Hastings spent with various friends, which I am sure were days of great length and tediousness to all concerned, Mrs. Hastings coming home in such a state of exhaustion that an unprejudiced observer might well have wondered that she should voluntarily expose herself to such fatigue, particularly for the sake of seeing people whom she freely criticised in most unfavorable terms.

There were the Mainwarings' long days, when they said reproachfully to one of their admirers from Mr. Caxton's whom they had not seen for a week, that he had not been to see them for many a long day, though each day as it passed, they declared, was far too short for all they wanted to get into it.

Jerry's 'long day' actually turned out to mean ten years, for that period elapsed before he walked again along the towing-path at the back of the houses in Duckington High Street.

I dare say if little Belle had understood that ten years was the long day which must elapse before she saw Jerry again, she might have thought it almost synonymous with never, for ten years is almost an unimaginable period at eight years old, requiring seven-league boots for the mind to surmount the hills and vales of childhood, and pass over the uninteresting tablelands of education, and reach what appears from that standpoint to be the paradise of the grown-up.

Those ten years had made very little difference in Duckington at the first glance. The Mainwaring girls (for girls is an elastic term, stretching in some cases well into middle life) still pervade the place, and promenade the High Street, and lean out of window and make themselves generally conspicuous. They are rather fatter, to be sure, and more untidy, but quite as good-natured; while their youthful admirers, who still retain their youth, not being identical with the flannel-clad forms that adorned the doctor's door-step ten years before, but successors of those same heroes, follow loyally in their footsteps in mild flirtation with the Mainwarings, and still hang over the railings and call loud boyish chaff to the smiling faces that always welcome them.

Mrs. Butler still sniffs disapproval, though she announces acidly that the Mainwarings are quite old enough to take care of themselves, which all sensible people thought was the case ten years before. Lucy Butler's last vagary, a very trying one to her mother, is renunciation of the world and its follies,

and the adoption of a semi-conventional garb, a sort of cousin of mercy effect which is eminently unbecoming, and certainly a mistake if it is intended, as some people unkindly hint, to attract the new curate, a pleasant, red-faced young cricketer, who is vowed to celibacy on account of his poor prospects, as surely as any of his Romish brethren. Moreover, if he were not too honest to marry on a hundred a year and no prospects, he has a little cousin somewhere in the north, as pleasant and red-faced and fond of cricket as he is, to whom he would offer his hand immediately, for she has had his heart ever since they played cricket together in pinafore days.

Miss Partlet trips about the town with her skirts held up round her skinny ankles in a fashion highly amusing to Mr. Caxton's pupils; but those same ankles carried her on many more kind errands than their sturdy limbs ever accomplished. Indeed one old woman told Mr. Philips, the red-faced curate, that she always thought of Miss Partlet's goloshes when she read about 'feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;' which Mr. Philips repeated as a good joke to Mr. Caxton, who pondered.

Mr. Caxton looks no older for ten years' cramming, though any one might think such work likely to bring gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.

I think the possession of a hobby (of which more anon) helped to keep him young. It is a great prevention to the ravages of age to have a hobby, and the wrinkles and hard lines that gathered and hardened

during the hours of ‘study,’ as it was facetiously called, smoothed out and softened when his library door closed behind him, and he gave a long stretch and shake, as if he were shaking off the dust of the ‘oaves,’ as he irreverently called those golden youths in the privacy of his own mind.

It is no use taking oaves too seriously, but it is certainly a trial for a thoughtful observer to sit for hours in the company of a score of young men in every attitude of listless inattention and profound boredom, or worse still when there are concealed jokes and shaking shoulders and exchange of little notes across the table, quite unconnected, it need scarcely be said, with the dog’s-eared lexicons or thumbed Euclids on the table, or with the careful and exhaustive explanations of the same from their tutor.

It is a pity to spell Life with too large an ‘L,’ but it is sometimes borne in on the mind what a very small ‘l’ these young fellows are beginning their life with, which might be spelt out and written so large and nobly.

Mark Hastings has not aged in the same proportion as he did that first year after his father’s death, though he never would be again the boy Mark whom the Mainwarings so much regretted ; but that perhaps was hardly to be wished.

Mrs. Hastings’ peevish face was occasionally to be seen through the dusky windows of the gloomy looking house, and now and then her shabby crape bonnet appeared in the street and at church ; but by steady cultivation of invalid habits she really had attained to



A tall young lady came down the steps of the landing-stage, and stood
watching him. — *Page 57*

a certain amount of delicacy, and Mark's incredulity of her sufferings was not so well founded as it had been at first.

Belle had grown a whole foot in those ten years, and though the ugly duckling could scarcely be said to have developed into the beautiful, stately swan, she was certainly not as plain as most of the Duckington people reckoned her, who were generally inclined to judge more from the toilet and hair-dressing than from the features and expression; and as Miss Pink, the dressmaker (latest Paris fashions), patronizingly said, 'Of course, poor Miss 'Astings can't afford her things properly made, so she 's never fit to be seen.'

But to any one who could look beyond a shabby sailor hat and an ill-fitting dress, Belle's small, sensitive face and large gray eyes, that look almost black from their thick fringe of dark lashes, were not unattractive; and the dark hair growing low on her forehead, and still falling in a mane over her shoulders, might have pleased some tastes better than the buns and frizzles and curls and painfully produced waves that were the fashion in Duckington.

She had had some education of a sort eminently unsatisfactory to Mrs. Hastings, since it was education without anything outward to show for it, seeing that she could not play a note on the piano, which, except as an outward and visible sign of unladylike lack of accomplishments, might be reckoned a mercy, as the piano-tuner was one of the economies practised in the Hastings family. Neither could she speak even as many words of French as Mrs. Hastings

fondly imagined herself capable of, and Latin was distinctly unfeminine.

That first year after Mr. Hastings died, his widow undertook the child's education, which meant two hours in the morning, when Belle sat up with a slate, or a copy-book, or a dog's-eared French grammar, and Mrs. Hastings gave divided attention, with pins in her mouth, altering a dress, or writing a note, or scolding Amelia through the open door. Constant interruptions nibbled into the two hours, and they generally came to an untimely end, either from Mrs. Hastings' patience being exhausted by the child's dense stupidity, or from some crisis in dressmaking, or from Amelia's delinquencies, making even pretended attention to Belle impossible.

Mark had shrewd suspicions of what Belle's lessons might mean under his mother's management, and he had been casting about vainly for some other means for the child's education,—even taking into serious consideration the national school, and the deadly opposition to be expected from his mother at such a degrading proposition,—when a happy solution of the difficulty presented itself in the person of Mr. Spence.

He was the organist at the church, whose sight was failing, and who was getting more and more incapable of dealing unassisted with those incarnations of mischief, choir-boys. He lived with his sister at a little house close to the churchyard. He had been national schoolmaster for years, but he was a gentle, thoughtful, kindly man, quite unfit to keep up with

all the present requirements of school life, or to struggle and push and grind and work his school up to the proficiency demanded in these stirring days ; and so the tide swept past him and left him stranded, and he got some bad reports, and the school managers began to look black at him, and there was a talk of a Board school.

He had a certain amount of musical ability, more feeling and appreciation than executive skill, but enough of that to satisfy the moderate requirements of Duckington. When, therefore, he resigned his place as schoolmaster he retained his post as organist, and was supported in his tenure of office by the vicar and a few loyal old friends, Mark Hastings among them, against the occasional attacks of more up-to-date members of the congregation or cultivated choir-men who belonged to choral societies, and had aspirations beyond the solid old double chants and dignified hymn tunes, and who protested against the old man's certainly ineffectual renderings of solemn, dull old composers, when, as they truly remarked, there are so many books of easy voluntaries for the organ, introducing all sorts of familiar airs, some of them operatic and very sweet.

He was never very good on the piano, so he did not get any pupils after Miss Windrows dispensed with his services in teaching her young ladies, and engaged a certain Signor Somebody, who somehow had contracted an Italian prefix at some musical college (being pure Loamshire born and bred) —

a prefix which looked very well on Miss Windrows' prospectuses, and was quite as efficacious with inquiring parents as the enigmatical letters following some professors' names, which the signor had failed to obtain the right to affix in his musical career.

So times were rather hard at the neat, little house in the churchyard, especially when Mr. Spence's sight began to fail and the choir-boys became proportionately troublesome. Miss Priscilla eked out the small income by plain needlework, but it did not amount to much, especially as she felt it necessary to do it in a genteel and almost condescending manner, as if payment were of no moment and she only did it for pleasure to employ her leisure time.

People get so used to what is always before their eyes, and the organist and his sister kept up such a brave outward show of genteel respectability, that I think they might have starved genteelly and respectably if Mr. Caxton's hobby had not brought him poking about in Duckington church.

Brasses were Mr. Caxton's hobby, and in Duckington church are many such of great antiquity and interest; and when Mr. Caxton had shaken off the dust of the oaves, he would hie him away gayly to the church, where, with heel-ball and tissue-paper, he would make rubbings with infinite patience and in all sorts of extraordinary attitudes, sorely fatiguing to elderly limbs and detrimental to well-brushed clothes. Sometimes, if the organ was sounding and he required information on any point, he would repair

to the organ gallery, and in this way he became acquainted with the old organist.

It was in this way, also, that he became acquainted with Mark ; for, on going to the organ gallery one day, he found the player to be a young man, who scowled round at him with anything but a pleasing expression. But Mr. Caxton was not to be scowled down, and he obtained more information from the surly, young man than he had ever been able to extract from poor old Spence's willing and amiable ignorance ; and useful information about brasses was such a very uncommon article in Duckington that Mr. Caxton was not likely to let it escape him, until Mark noisily shut up the organ and slouched out of the church with the very palpable purpose of getting out of his way.

Music was Mark's hobby, and perhaps it was this that kept him from aging, in the same way that the brasses kept Mr. Caxton young ; anyhow, it was the one little bit of sweetness in his life amid the general bitterness. In those happy, old days when all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them had seemed spread before the boy's eyes to choose in which bright valley or on what sunny mountain-top he should spend his life, he had had radiant dreams of taking up music as a profession. But his talent, if talent he had, was not robust enough to withstand his father's good-natured opposition, or the copious floods of cold water which his mother poured on the idea, as she was deeply impressed with the notion that music was not the profession for a gentleman, and that play-

ing the fiddle was derogatory, and only suitable for dancing-masters and blind beggars.

Of course now such dreams were as useless as to wish that he were the son of an honest man.

Mr. Spence had always been a great ally of Mark's, and had submitted to a great deal of interference and dictation from the young fellow's masterful ways, and, now that those high-handed days were over, he made him free of the organ whenever he liked to come and play out some of the bitterness and wretchedness of his heart. In old days Mark had sometimes helped the organist with choir practices, and had boxed the boys' ears freely and awed them into a submission that appeared quite miraculous to the old man ; and now, just when Mark was fretting himself about Belle's education, Mr. Spence asked him for his assistance again with the choir. It was easy enough to come to terms, they were both so poor ; it was no question of charity on either side. Mark could not afford to pay for Belle's instruction, and Mr. Spence could not afford to pay for Mark's help with the organ and choir, so there was no obligation on either side ; and the only person dissatisfied with the arrangement was Mrs. Hastings, who thought anything short of Miss Windrows derogatory.

Derogatory was a favorite word of Mrs. Hastings', and she would rather, she declared, ill as she was, work night and day to teach that stupid child than that any one from their house should go to be taught by a man who had been a common schoolmaster.

The day after Mr. Caxton had seen Mark in the

church he got the whole history of him and his troubles out of the organist. No doubt he had heard it all before, as he had come to Duckington when it was fresh in every one's thoughts; but country town gossip did not interest him, and it was principally for the sake of such help as Mark could give him about the brasses that he persevered in friendly overtures to the young man, in spite of his rude surliness, which only gradually gave way to Mr. Caxton's imperturbable courtesy and good nature.

And in the course of extracting Mark's history from the old man, Mr. Caxton got an insight into the poverty at Church Cottage and the genteel straits there endured, and racked his kindly old brains for some time in seeking a way to alleviate them.

Ultimately he appealed to Miss Priscilla to undertake the mending and managing of the linen at his establishment.

'Servants are so careless,' he said, 'and laundresses, as a rule, so unprincipled, that it will be a great benefit if you will manage the whole business for me.'

And he almost convinced her that the advantage was mainly on his side, and that by her care and economy she nearly repaid the weekly stipend which made such a wonderful difference to the comfort of Church Cottage.

It was not so easy to provide remunerative employment for Mr. Spence. His blindness and entire ignorance of the subject made him quite unavailable as regards help in the matter of brasses, and music

was not one of the subjects of the oaves' curriculum, and in their lighter moments the banjo and plantation songs seemed the utmost they aspired to in that direction ; and Mr. Caxton, looking doubtfully at his own well-kept, stiff old fingers and his neatly gaitered feet, which had known a touch of gout more than once, felt that organ lessons at his age were out of the question.

So help to the old organist had to be done indirectly, by giving such presents as gentility will accept. And in passing let it be noticed how curiously clearly defined are the limits between polite civility and insolent charity. You may give a pheasant, buying it and sending it with the poultreer's name clearly inscribed, so that no one could imagine that you have preserves in your back-garden ; but if you send the equivalent of that pheasant in beef from the butcher's, what mortal offence would be given ! So, also, a bunch of grapes from the greengrocer's is admissible, but a peck of potatoes would be intolerable.

So Mr. Caxton had to make little, elegant, indirect presents, when it would have saved a heap of trouble if he might have drawn a cheque out of his superfluity and have done with it ; and it was when he was carrying some of these offerings that he discovered Belle at her studies, and learnt the bargain between Mark and the organist.

Sometimes the child was crouched on the fender or perched in the window in some ungainly attitude, for elegance was not likely to be much attended to by

a blind teacher. But she received a good, simple, solid foundation of reading, writing, and arithmetic, such as they have in national schools, and such as are not always to be found in young ladies' schools. And on this foundation was built up a curious incongruous mass of reading of all sorts and descriptions, for the child, whom Mrs. Hastings found so dull, was an omnivorous reader; and as the old man's sight failed more and more, he got more and more dependent on other people, and Belle's lessons consisted more and more of reading aloud. She was quite contented with this form of instruction, and ready to go on for hours with her fresh, soft young voice, making desperate plunges at difficult words, ploughing through much that was unintelligible to her, picking out bits that interested her, and imagining a great deal that was not in the intention of the author, as, I am told, some admirers of Browning are apt to do.

The supply of books, it need hardly be said, came from Mr. Caxton, who sometimes smiled to himself when he looked in and found the child reading some heavy work of history or biography, or even theology, and for her sake as well as the old man's he would introduce some lighter reading occasionally — fiction, or poetry, or travels — which made high festival at Church Cottage, and caused Belle to be late home to tea, and made even kind, old Miss Priscilla protest against straining young eyes and voices, and making young backs round poking over books. Mr. Spence used to apologize to Mr. Caxton for his selfishness in letting the child go on — ‘But still, she seems to like

it ;' and Mr. Caxton grew interested in the shy, dark-eyed little girl who was having such a strange, unusual education, as well as in the bitter, resentful young fellow who wailed out the injustice and hardness of his lot on the organ while Mr. Caxton was poking and peering after his brasses.

It seemed utterly impossible to help the lad in any way. He was such a very prickly, sensitive subject, resenting even a kind word or a sympathizing look, going out of his way to avoid meeting, and looking steadily in an opposite direction when they accidentally did so, especially when others were present. He avoided, as if by instinct, sundry cunning little traps that Mr. Caxton laid for his pleasure, ignoring the evening paper with some important public news left as if by accident by Mark's hat in the porch, and declining the choice cigar that Mr. Caxton could not find room for in his cigar-case, though he had been standing in the rain eagerly scanning the posters outside the book-stall, and though he craved as only a smoker does who has given up smoking for economy's sake for a taste of good tobacco.

It need hardly be said that it was more than all Mr. Caxton's arts were able to attain, though he made several ineffectual efforts to do so, to decoy Mark into his comfortable library, with its generous fires and delightful arm-chairs, whose dachshund proportions would have electrified former ages of spindle legs and upright backs ; where the light fell pleasantly from shaded lamps, the lighting of which did not involve the overpowering smell of paraffin which seemed a

necessary adjunct at home ; where the walls were lined with shelves full of all sorts of books new and old ; and where the tables were strewn with all the latest publications and magazines. If Mr. Caxton could once have inveigled Mark in there, he felt confident he could have drawn some of the wretchedness out of his face, that was too young for such a look to become chronic. But this could not be managed, and he abused himself as an old fool who, in all conscience, had more than enough of youthful humanity, and yet must go out of his way to get at a surly, ill-conditioned young fellow who would have none of him.

CHAPTER V.

JERRY'S RETURN.

All the land in flowery squares,
Beneath a broad and equal-blowing wind,
Smelt of the coming summer.

TENNYSON.

BUT I want to get on to the end of Jerry's long day, those ten years during which many a time, after the first despair had passed away, Belle had looked up and down the towing-path wondering if he would ever come that way again.

But I think when the end of that long day really came Belle had forgotten all about him as completely as he had forgotten her, and when, one beautiful May morning, she came out into the garden and betook herself to her old place by the wall overlooking the canal, her mind was entirely taken up with other things.

She did not need that old earthwork now to raise her to the level of the wall, as she had grown tall and slim; and though, as I have said, Duckington criticised the dowdiness of her appearance, and though I am bound to allow with Duckington that her dress was washed out and short in the waist and skimpy in the skirt, there was a certain youthful grace in her

slight figure and natural, unaffected movements that all Monsieur Entrechat's instructions could not have imparted ; and he, you know, was the dancing-master at Miss Windrows', and came down from London, where he taught all the nobility and gentry, and, I am inclined to think, royalty itself.

She had a little color that day, which was unusual to her ordinarily pale, little face, and this made her eyes brighter under the long, dark lashes, and showed that they were not black but gray, with dark rings in them. She had climbed up to look at a thrush's nest in the fork of the old apple-tree, that was all covered with pink and white blossom as young as if the branches that bore them were not gnarled and twisted and knotted with age and winter storms.

There were four little birds in the nest, ugly enough just yet with their long bare necks and big mouths, though beautiful, no doubt, in the bright eyes of the mother, who scolds from the upper branch at the intruder who is looking at her treasures, while her mate trolls a jolly May song from the lilac bush hard by, undisturbed by the anxiety that troubles the maternal breast.

That climb among the apple blossom has ruffled Belle's hair into pretty little rings and curls on her forehead such as no pincers or irons could have produced, and set her Tam-o'-Shanter — she still wears a Tam-o'-Shanter, and I am not sure that it may not be the very same, so shabby is it ; — jauntily on one side in so becoming a manner that no one, of her own sex anyhow, would believe that it is purely

accidental and not the result of careful arrangement before the glass.

But the long and the short of it is, that any one might have been attracted by Belle's face that morning as she stood looking over the wall away up the towing-path.

She was debating what she should do with the day, for she had it all to herself. She was not going to Mr. Spence's, and much as she liked going, she was young enough to feel that it was a holiday, and that she ought to enjoy it.

But what gave the greatest sense of holiday was, that Mrs. Hastings had gone out for the day — one of those long days of which I have spoken, which were so exhausting to herself and, it is to be feared, to her friends. Mark, too, would not be back to dinner, as he had to go on some business for Mr. Huxley, having, almost in spite of himself, worked into that gentleman's confidence, and being treated with a trust that he altogether repudiated and disclaimed deserving.

'Of all contrary, pig-headed, obstinate fellows,' his much-tried employer protested, 'give me Mark Hastings; but I would trust him with untold gold.'

Even Mary Anne, the successor of many another successor of Amelia, had gone out, though this was not in the bond, and was done entirely without Mrs. Hastings' knowledge.

'You see, Miss Belle dear, mother's terrible sadly, and the baby cutting his teeth crossways, so I said I'd look round for a minute or two; and I'll set your

dinner all ready before I go, and you ain't never one much for potatoes, so you can have it just exactly when you feels hungry ; and I 'll turn a plate down over it, to keep Sam from getting at it, as is the worst, thievingest cat as I ever see, though missus won't ever believe as it 's him. And, Miss Belle dear,' went on the girl, with an insinuating sidling motion, ' don't you go for to tell the missus as I 've just run out. She do worrit a gal so, and it ain't often as my cousin what 's in the militia comes over.'

Which did not seem to Belle to exactly coincide with the first reasons given for going out, mother being sadly and baby cutting its teeth crossways ; but she did not make any objection on this score.

' It will only be two minutes as I 'll be gone, and if any one comes to the door don't trouble ; there ain't likely to be anything as wants an answer, and the milkman always leaves the tin by the scraper.'

Which, considering that Mary Anne only meant to be out for a couple of minutes, seemed to be unnecessary providence. But time slips away when a girl gets home, especially when a cousin in the militia is paying a call ; so when Mary Anne hurried back late in the afternoon, it was annoying to find the kitchen fire out, having first with an artfully aimed cinder burnt a hole in a tea-cloth hanging to dry.

' Miss Belle might have kep' an eye on it, that she might ! But she ain't one bit of good. Why, our Bessie at home, as ain't six, can mind the baby, and put the kettle on, and fetch 'arf-a-pint from the public as 'andy as any one. And that cloth might have

burnt the house down ; and whatever am I to say to missus how it got burnt I'd like to know ?'

Sam ran out of the dining-room as Mary Anne looked in, with that unmistakable guilty look of consciousness of deserving punishment which naturally draws the attention to detect the crime, and Mary Anne delivered a well-directed flick with the burnt cloth, with very little doubt that a smack was deserved.

Belle must have eaten her dinner in a very untidy way, for part of the meat was on the seat of the chair, the glass of water upset into the tray, and the protecting plate on the ground cracked across.

It was difficult to apportion the blame between Sam and Belle. Of course none was due to Mary Anne, who felt deeply injured. But when she went to seek the other culprit at the bottom of the garden she was not to be found, and Mary Anne had to face the prospect of her mistress's return to find a burnt tea-cloth, a cracked plate, and Miss Belle missing.

' It 's those tiresome, interfering Mainwarings,' Mary Anne tearfully protested. ' They 're always a-watching and a-prying, and I expect they see me just step round the corner, and come over and fetched Miss Belle away. And a fine piece of work they 'll make of it ! As if I could n't say what I sees with all them young gents at Caxton 's ! '

So Mary Anne glared impotent defiance at the house opposite, which, if looks could kill, would have ended the careers of the Misses Mainwaring, who, however, quite regardless of their doom or of Mary

Anne's misdeeds, were solemnly wobbling up and down High Street, held up by attendant oaves on either side, in their first essays at bicycling.

But, happily for Mary Anne's peace of mind, at this juncture Belle made her appearance with a basketful of cowslips, and with such a strange, unusual brightness in her face that even Mary Anne noticed it, and had not the heart to scold her — more especially as she nobly undertook the responsibility of the cracked plate and even the burnt tea-cloth.

But where had Belle been to get all those cowslips and the brightness in her face? Why, Jerry had come back, and had taken her in his boat far away up the river, beyond all experience of dull, trudging walks with Mark, or even what were meant to be holiday excursions, when she and Mark put some bread and cheese in their pockets and explored the neighborhood.

She had known Jerry again directly, though he was ten years older, and ten years between twenty and thirty generally work great changes in a man's appearance ; and he had known her too after a minute or two of puzzle and wonder where on earth he could have seen that bright, eager, delighted child's face before. ‘But then,’ he told himself, ‘I had not the least recollection of that queer, little kid being at all pretty.’

He had had a good many experiences in those ten years, and had seen a good many girls' faces ; and many of them had smiled on him, for Jerry was one of the sort that women smile on. But I do not

think in those ten years he had seen eyes more honestly, unaffectedly, beamingly pleased to see him, shining down on him with such unconcealed delight, without a spark of coquetry.

I think it was that absence of coquetry that made him forget that those ten years had changed the child of seven into almost a grown-up girl.

Why, many girls come out at seventeen, and have blossomed into all the airs and graces of young ladyhood, and have admirers (not in Eton jackets), and even serious love affairs, and some, indeed, are already a little bit *blasée*.

But circumstances had combined to make Belle very childish, always living with people considerably older than herself, and having no companion of her own age with whom to compare and measure herself, or to suggest or initiate emancipation from childhood's restrictions. So Belle's hair still fell in a dark mane over her shoulders, and she went up to bed at an early hour, and was scolded and found fault with by Mrs. Hastings, and even on occasions by Mary Anne, in a manner that many younger girls would have resented.

'Have you been here all the time?' Jerry asked.
'Why, it must be eight or nine years since I was here last. And yet the very first time I come this way, here you are just the same — well, perhaps not just quite the same. I expect you've grown a bit, haven't you? You were a very small person then — all eyes and black hair. Do you remember the jolly, little button-holes you used to make me? You might give

me a bit of that apple-blossom now. By Jove, the old tree is a picture !'

And when she had picked him a dainty, little bit with half-open pink buds, he declared he was quite relieved to see that she could move.

'I thought you must have taken root, like Daphne or some of those mythological people ; and I was wondering how you looked in winter with snow on your Tam-o'-Shanter and icicles on your eyelashes.'

And then Belle told him how, on the contrary, she was very seldom there now, and how she went to lessons every day and had no time to stare over the wall as she used when she was a baby.

'It is only because to-day is a holiday, as Mr. Spence's brother is coming to see him, and Aunt Lucy has gone out, and Mark won't be in to dinner, and even Mary Anne is out ; so I am all alone. I was just thinking what I should do to amuse myself, and if it was warm enough to sit out here under the apple-tree. There is a thrush's nest in the fork, and they are quite good company.'

'All alone ? Poor little girl, with only thrushes for playfellows ! Well, I 'm another lonely one, without even a thrush to speak to. I only came last night, and I hadn't met a soul I know or who knows me, till I saw you looking over the wall. I 'm stopping at the "George" for the present, and I want, if I can, to get a boat and row up the river. Suppose you come along with me ? You can find birds'-nests and gather cowslips while I have a look round the old place. Have you ever been to Poundley ?'

'No ; but I 've heard about it. It 's where Sir Giles Haviland used to live.'

Jerry nodded. 'That 's the place. And what do you know about the Havilands ?'

'Miss Priscilla tells me about them sometimes, and Mark says old Sir Giles was a splendid old man.'

'So he was ; so he was.'

'Mark says his son is not half such a man as his father.'

'Well, Mark, whoever he may be, is about right there too ; but I don't know what opportunity he has had of forming such a poor opinion of him. What did he say besides of this worthless son ?'

'He said he was extravagant and reckless.'

'Ah ! Anything else ?'

'That he broke his father's heart.'

Jerry gave a long, sharp draw in of his breath between his teeth.

'He 's just wrong there, this Mr. Wiseacre Mark. Young Haviland may have been a good-for-nothing young fool, but his father did not think him so, nor would if he had been twenty times as bad. But there ! run and put on your bonnet and bring a basket for the cowslips. I suppose there 's no getting out at the back here, so you must meet me at the bridge ; and I 'll go and charter a boat and lay in some provender for our lunch.'

So Jerry went off to ransack the confectioner's shop for tarts and cakes and sweets suitable for the little girl that was to bear him company, and was busy arranging the cushions in the boat he had hired when

what appeared to him, out of the corner of his eye, to be a tall young lady came down the steps of the landing-stage and stood watching him; and it was only when he glanced round impatiently, wondering what had become of the child, that he realized it was Belle.

He gave a long whistle almost of consternation.

'Why,' he said, 'you never mean to say you're as tall as that?'

'Yes,' said Belle penitently. 'I'm very sorry, but I can't help it; and I don't think I've done growing yet.'

'I don't believe it's really you,' Jerry went on. 'It's an elder sister. I shall go back and look for my little friend under the apple-tree.'

But, in spite of her stature, there was a very childish quiver in Belle's lips, and I think very infantile tears would soon have rushed into her eyes if Jerry had not ceased his banter and held out his hand to her to help her into the boat.

'Sit down quick,' he said, 'so that I may forget how tall you are, and I'll row off as fast as I can out of sight; for what would all the Mrs. Grundys in the place say at this proceeding? There are always dozens of Mrs. Grundys in a country town.'

'I don't think there are any in Duckington,' Belle said, brightening up now the fear of disappointment was removed. 'I never heard of one.'

'Happy, little girl!' said Jerry.

CHAPTER VI.

POUNDLEY COURT.

A league of grass washed by a slow, broad stream
That, stirred with languid pulses of the oar,
Waves all its lazy lilies and creeps on.

TENNYSON.

POUNDLEY is a lovely, old place, standing on rising ground; with the park sloping down to the river, which there widens out into quite a considerable stream, with a small island in the middle, on which some big willows, now in all the dainty freshness of their spring bravery, dipped long branches into the water.

From that island the old house looked very well, with its three gables and massive stacks of chimneys of richly colored old brick, and the gray stone mullions of its windows with their diamond panes. Over one of the gables the ivy had thrown a green mantle, showing dark against the background of elms in their pale spring dress, not very thick yet, for it was a backward season; and among the elms were to be seen the massive horizontal branches, indigo foliage, and ruddy limbs of a large cedar.

There was plenty of time for Belle to study the beauties of Poundley, for Jerry was tired with his long

pull up against the stream — five miles by the winding of the stream, though it is barely four by the road, and less than three as the crow flies. He fastened the painter of the boat to one of the drooping willow-boughs, and lay back at the end of the boat with his cap drawn down over his eyes, leaving Belle to her own devices.

She was very well used to such treatment, and more than contented to be left to herself now in such entirely new and interesting surroundings, with all the beautiful, tender tints of early spring, hundreds of shades of green on the trees and copses to right and left, and the great wide sweep of sunny park-land, over which now and then soft cloud-shadows passed. Nearer was the bright, sparkling river, stirring the dipping willow-boughs or the feathery water-weed, running swift and oily-smooth, except now and then when a fish jumped after a fly with a splash, making a widening big ring on the surface. Out of the sedges and osiers on the banks, among which the yellow iris blossomed gayly, flew little bright-eyed birds of quiet plumage, of sorts unknown to Belle, and, I am afraid, to me also. But once she gave a cry which roused Jerry from his dreams, waking or sleeping, for a kingfisher flashed past in tropical magnificence.

Down in the water she could see shoals of merry, little fish flitting about, and sometimes some larger ones sent the smaller fry scudding, and lay lashing the stream with lazy, pliant tails, till a movement of Belle's sent them off like a flash, too quick for her

to see which way they went, and leaving only a little stir in the mud to tell they had been there at all.

And in the boat there was enough to occupy her, leave alone the silent figure at the end of the boat, her old friend Jerry come back out of the dim memories of childhood's days ; for there was a great basketful of cowslips that she was tying up into bunches and balls, and planning who should have a share of them.

She and Jerry had landed two or three times on the way up and picked them, and Jerry seemed to know all the best places to find them, and to enjoy picking them as much as she did ; and he was as keen as a boy after birds'-nests, only, happily, without a boy's uncontrollable instinct of destruction, which would have spoilt all Belle's pleasure.

He was as light-hearted and gay as a boy too, pushing through hedges and climbing trees till they came in sight of the Court, when he grew silent and the gayety faded out of his eyes ; and he sat for a long time after he had fastened the boat, looking and looking and looking at the old house up on the hill, that seemed to look back at him (for houses certainly have expression) kindly and pleasantly. And then, as I have said, he lay back in the end of the boat either asleep or wrapped up in his own thoughts.

By-and-by he roused himself.

'Why, you poor, little girl, you must be starving,' he said. 'What a selfish brute I am ! But you're the best of good company, little Belle, for you know

how to hold your tongue. There's not one woman in a thousand can do that ; but you're not a woman, only a little girl. Keep a little girl as long as you can. It's just like kittens. It is such a pity when they grow up into cats, sly and cruel, without any sense of humor, and with sharp claws under those sleek velvet paws.'

'I don't think all cats are like that,' protested Belle.

'No, wise, little girl ; nor women, either. Though when once you have been well scratched you distrust the whole race. But look here ! I've all sorts of nice things in that basket under the seat, but we'll row round to the other side of the island first before we fall to, for I remember—I expect the people up there'—nodding towards the house—'don't care for picnic-parties within sight of the windows, though I don't think we shall leave broken bottles or sandwich-papers or egg-shells about.'

So they went out of sight of the house before they unpacked the basket, and Belle was quite child enough to enjoy the nice things which she had only till now beheld from afar in Mr. Goodenough's window. Neither did Jerry appear to be too old, though perhaps jam tarts and chocolate cakes did not taste such ambrosia to him as they did to unaccustomed Belle.

After lunch, when he was smoking a pipe and Belle was dropping bits of sponge-cake to the shoals of little fish which came nosing and pushing after the morsels, Jerry suddenly proposed that they should go up and see the house.

'I wonder if the people are there.'

'The Havilands?'

'No. Did n't you know they are away? They let the house to some rich City people.'

'How could they?' said Belle.

'Ah! how could they?' echoed Jerry, blowing a great cloud of smoke.

'Don't you wish you had a beautiful house like that?' Belle went on, intently watching the greedy struggles of the fish after a large piece of cake. 'Should n't you be very proud of it, and always live in it and never go away? I sometimes fancy what I should do if I had a great big house, and lots of servants and plenty of money. Dad and I used often to fancy those sort of things; but Mark does n't like it; it makes him wretched; and once, when I was telling him what I should do if I had a lot of money, he almost cried.'

But Jerry did not seem much interested about Mark; though, like Mark, he was not inclined to enter into Belle's imaginings of what she should do if Poundley belonged to her, with all its trees and park and widespread estate, for Jerry told her that at one time the Havilands had owned half the country.

'Come along,' he said; 'it's ten chances to one they may be away. I'd dearly like to have a look round; and there's an old lady at one of the lodges who used to know me very well, and she would tell me what's going on up at the Court. Anyhow, I know she will be pleased to see me.'

So he pulled the boat across to the other side, and got out and led the way across a couple of meadows to a snug, little thatched lodge, a perfect bridal bouquet of the early white clematis, which festooned porch and windows and roof and chimneys in wanton luxuriance.

'You stop here,' Jerry said when they came near, 'and I'll go and interview the old lady.'

So Belle, with that unquestioning compliance which made her to Jerry's mind such an ideal companion, sat down on a felled tree, while he went on, and she saw him bend to get into the little porch under the trails of the clematis, which nearly hid his meeting with an old woman in a white cap tied under the chin, and a little check shawl across her shoulders tucked into the band of a spotless, white apron.

That meeting seemed to be of an ecstatic character on the part of the old woman, for even at that distance Belle could hear the shrill cackle of a cracked, old voice, though the words were not distinguishable, and through the clematis she could see Jerry bend down and kiss the apple cheek.

The old woman would hardly let him go; and he had to turn round more than once to answer farewell words called after him, and once she set off hobbling briskly in pursuit, to brush some dust off his coat-sleeve.

'Come along, Belle,' he said gayly, as he came up to her. 'They're all away and workmen in the

house, so we can go anywhere we like. What luck !'

He seemed to know his way about very well, for he took a short cut across the park to some mossy stone steps hidden among the bushes, which led up on to a terrace, suddenly appearing before the astonished gaze of a young gardener, who was rolling a strip of turf in the leisurely fashion of his kind, at the proportion of about one minute's work to five of rest. *

He was so astonished at their sudden appearance from such an unexpected quarter—'Up them old steps as never ain't used by no one'—that he did not protest against such impudent trespassing, as otherwise he might have done. Jerry stalked past him, followed by Belle, as if the whole place belonged to him, and with the same cool assurance marched in at the front-door, which stood open, the entrance being occupied by whitewashers' ladders and boards, though the workmen themselves were away at one of those numerous meals which to the uninitiated though interested spectator seem to occur so frequently in that sort of work, and especially when there is urgent necessity for a job being finished.

To Belle there was a delightful sense of adventure in thus coolly exploring another person's house, even if the family were not at home. Why, Mark and she, in their occasional excursions, hurried out of a meadow if some one looked over a hedge at them, and went half a mile round if there were any doubt

of a footpath being public. But Belle would have followed Jerry into a lion's den, such confidence did his cool assurance inspire.

It was not quite the same, however, when he bade her wait for him in the hall while he went to find the housekeeper, and left her alone, feeling very small and young and intrusive, sitting in a great, black oak, throne-like chair with a canopy over it, in the inner hall, which was impressively dark and solemn with its oak ceiling and panelling, and suits of old armor, over which hung groups of dingy banners, some of them tattered and stained and moth-eaten, and trophies of antique weapons — pikes and richly chased arquebuses and swords, and massive bits and spurs.

There was a great open fireplace, with settles right inside in the chimney-corner, and a huge log, the trunk of a good-sized tree, resting on the polished dogs. Over the fireplace, set deep in the elaborately carved panelling, which reproduced constantly the Haviland arms and the mailed hand grasping a broken sword, was a portrait of a man in Elizabethan dress, with a pointed beard and gay, laughing eyes, that seemed oddly familiar to her, though they were looking at her over a stiff starched ruff and slashed satin sleeves, and from under a broad hat with a long drooping feather.

The hall was dark and the light on the picture bad, but from where Belle sat those eyes seemed to meet hers with laughing recognition ; and when she summoned up courage to leave her oaken throne and go nearer, those eyes still followed her, and she was

standing wrapped in contemplation before it when Jerry's voice startled her.

‘ Hallo, Belle, where have you got to?’

And then she knew what the likeness was.

‘ Oh, Jerry,’ she cried, ‘ do look here ! This picture is exactly like you.’

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD HOME.

His latest breath
Of parley at the door of death
Is a blessing on his wayward son.

LONGFELLOW.

OF course it has long been patent to the reader, and would have been to any one less unsophisticated than Belle, that this friend of hers — Jerry — was none other than Sir Gerald Haviland, son of that Sir Giles who was so widely known and respected in the neighborhood of Duckington ; and that when she first made his acquaintance, and he passed so regularly along the towing-path under the garden wall, he was going to Mr. Caxton's to be coached before going up to Cambridge.

He had been then, in fact, one of those oaves of whom experience had given the tutor so low an opinion ; and as he had been a ‘wet bob’ at Eton and was fond of rowing, and the river ran its pleasant meandering course from Poundley to Duckington, he generally chose that way, and pulled down to the bridge, and leaving his boat there, took the short cut by the canal behind the Hastings’ house.

The appellation ‘oaf’ could only be applied to young Gerald Haviland in a generic way, for he seemed to have escaped the awkward, cubbish age, which was no doubt due to his mother, for Lady Haviland had the most charming manners herself, and a wonderful way of imparting them to others. She had been known to take in hand a melancholy mass of blushes, hot ears, huge hands and trampling feet, and awkward, stammering tongue, and smile and soothe it into quite a presentable, comfortable, reasonable human being. Sir Giles always said it was a pity she had not a dozen sons instead of only one, and he giving her no scope for her talents in working on the raw material.

She was not so successful with girls, or perhaps it was that she outshone them, and that they got into the habit of standing aside and seeing their elegant mother fascinate and charm every one. Certainly Mabel and Constance Haviland were not nearly as attractive as their mother, taking more after their father, and being good, simple, straightforward girls, without any of that mysterious gift of charm which is independent of beauty, rank, and talent, and more powerful than all.

Those were happy old days before Jerry went to Cambridge, and you may be sure they came back very vividly to his mind that day as he went with Belle from one room to another of the old home. Even then there had been little clouds, no bigger, however, than a man’s hand, of money troubles. The Havilands had always been liberal, open-handed,

careless people in money matters. Each time the estates passed from father to son they were a little more encumbered, and there were days when the family solicitor paid a visit, and every one looked very gloomy and anxious for the time being ; but as soon as that respectable legal functionary had taken his departure a reaction immediately ensued. My lady ordered the new harness for her carriage-horses, the squire closed the bargain about that hunter, the girls no longer hesitated about those ball-dresses, and the sons went off to the Derby with a light heart. So Jerry was not so entirely to blame as was generally supposed because the crash came in his time ; the pace generally gets faster as you get near the bottom of the hill, and the family coach had started on its downward course long before Jerry handled the reins.

There were such bright dreams before Jerry went to Cambridge. The Havilands were great people for dreaming of the future. There were improvements to be made on the estate, cottages built, drainage carried out, farms put in repair. The old man was very keen on Jerry being master of the Kingshire hounds. When he and Jerry jogged home together after a good day's hunting they always talked of this. It had been Sir Giles's ambition all his life, but circumstances had never been favorable till now, when Lord Rockston was talking of giving up the hounds, and Poundley was the very centre of the country.

'I'm too old for it now, Jerry,' he would say ; 'but I should uncommonly like to see you the master.'

Then there was the idea, very dear to his mother, that he should represent the county in Parliament. Jerry would wax very enthusiastic at times about this project ; and now, as he stood in the room that had been his mother's boudoir, he thought this had been his one hope and ambition all his life, and that he was a disappointed man, forgetting all the hundred and one other things that had seemed the *summum bonum* while the fancy lasted.

He would not let Belle come into that room with him, for his father's portrait hung there, and there was a certain look of reproach in the kind, old eyes in the picture which Jerry had never seen in the original ; but he went in there by himself and did a few minutes' penance, which left him a little serious for some time after, though he was gay enough as he rowed Belle back again down the river.

Those ten years, the long day, the eternity to little Belle, were not a pleasant time to look back on, standing in one's childhood's home, where all the associations were pleasant and pure and peaceful. It had all been downhill, and the pace had been reckless and precipitate — Well, the old place was let to rich City people, and the old father was dead. He seemed to break up directly he turned his back on Poundley ; and though he never said a word of reproach or looked a look, and though he died with his head on Jerry's arm and blessing him with his last breath, Jerry was not so sure in his heart of hearts, though he would not allow it even to himself, but

that this Mark whom Belle had quoted was right, and that he had broken his father's heart.

It wanted all Jerry's elastic spirits and that nature of his, off which trouble or morbid fancies rolled like water off a duck's back, to forget that last scene — the sturdy old Briton dying in that foreign hotel, all gilding and marble and parquetry flooring ; waited on at first by a little crop-headed, perky French waiter who could not understand a word of the English 'milor,' who in return regarded him as something between an imp and a monkey ; and ultimately by a white-capped *Sœur*, who told her beads diligently through that long night when Sir Giles's head lay on Jerry's arm and the heretic soul was passing.

Happily, Constance and Mabel were both married before the crash came, and Poundley was let ; and Lady Haviland's settlement was sufficient for her to live in elegant economy abroad and to help out Jerry's income, which could never quite cover his expenses without assistance.

A sudden impulse had brought him now to the neighborhood of his old home, where he had not been for three years, when he brought his father's remains to lie with his forefathers in Poundley churchyard ; and then he did not go to the house, but only to the little, old church inside the park gates, with its walls covered with tablets of many generations of Havilands.

There were none of the old Haviland retainers left in the house, but the name of the old owners of

the place was still a name to conjure with ; so Jerry found no difficulty in getting leave to go where he liked in his old home, unmolested by attentive servants on the lookout for tips or suspicious of burglarious intentions, and he had not to endure the trial of having his own ancestors pointed out to him and expounded with cockney glibness — ‘ Lydy Anne ’ or ‘ Sir ’Enery.’

And as Belle was quite unconscious of his identity, he had not to endure pity or curiosity ; and, indeed, she was too much occupied with the interest and novelty of it all to notice the expression of her companion, who accordingly could receive all the impressions that came to him without any regard for appearances or endeavoring to put a brave face on it and pretend not to care.

For he did care, and that very keenly. He had never realized how keenly till he called Belle to come away, and took a last look round at the old pictures and the family coat-of-arms.

If he had been with any one who had known, he would most likely have made a joke and assumed a light-heartedness he did not feel. When people get a certain character they sometimes act up to it in spite of very contrary feelings, and Jerry bore the character of easy, happy-go-lucky carelessness, deservedly, no doubt, as a rule ; but on the rare occasions when he did feel seriously and deeply, he felt bound still to act up to his usual character and pass the situation off with a laugh and a jest.

‘ It would be too funny to see Jerry Haviland take

anything seriously ! ' his young lady friends used to say.

' I wonder if the Havilands will ever come back ? ' Belle's voice broke into his reverie as they made their way down to the boat. He had forgotten her very existence and stalked on ahead, while she followed contentedly behind, not having any grown-up sense of dignity or resentment at being left in the lurch, and she was just following out her own line of thought, hardly expecting any answer to her question : ' I wonder if the Havilands will ever come back ? '

And she was quite startled when Jerry faced round and stood looking back at the old house with a strange, earnest look on his face, which made him look more than ever like the picture in the hall.

' The Havilands come back ? ' he said. ' Yes, some day ; ' and then he added under his breath, ' Please God, some day.' And he took off his cap as he said it, as if it had been a prayer or a solemn oath that he was taking.

' Do you want them to come back so much ? ' Belle asked.

' I wish it more than anything else in the world,' he said. And then he added, with a laugh : ' And when that day comes you and I will open the ball, little Belle.'

' I should n't think the Havilands would let us,' Belle answered gravely. Even in her wildest imaginations she liked to have a certain amount of possibility, and, of course, this was impossible.

After this, as I have said, Jerry was gay and full of

fun ; but he stopped the boat before he got to the bridge, and bade her get out under the willows.

‘ You know your way home,’ he said ; ‘ and though you ignore Mrs. Grundy, I am sure she lives in Duckington, and she may be standing on the bridge.’

‘ I don’t care if she is,’ said Belle.

‘ That shows you don’t know her, and I hope you never may. Have you had a pleasant afternoon, child ? ’

‘ It has been the pleasantest day I ever had in my life,’ she answered, and her face was lit up into actual beauty as she spoke.

She was standing on the bank, looking almost more than her real height from being above him, reminding him again that she was no longer the child he had pitied and blown kisses to as he passed her garden wall ten years ago ; and a little shy look came into her face as she met his gaze, in which the admiration was too evident even for her to mistake.

‘ Good-bye,’ he said. ‘ I am going away again to-morrow ; but I shall not be so long away this time, and when I come home it will be to stay. I shall come and find you. And mind ! you are to dance with me at the Havilands’ house-warming ; so don’t forget. Now run away home as fast as you can. Here are your cowslips ; you were going to leave them behind. They do look a little limp, but they will soon revive when you put them in water.’

‘ Good-bye,’ she said.

He had almost been afraid there would have been a scene — tears and sobs, as there had been when he

parted with her before ; but she went away quite quietly, and as he watched her passing in and out of the willows' shade and the full May sunshine, he gave a sigh.

' Perhaps it is quite as well I am going away, both for her and me,' he thought.

' Why, Belle,' Mark said that evening when he came in tired and dusty — into a house sweet with cowslips, which filled bowls and basins and vases — ' Why, what have you been doing to yourself, child? I hardly recognized you?'

' Oh, it is only that I have plaited up my hair, Mark. It was hot hanging about my shoulders.'

' Is that all?' said Mark, surveying the girl, much as Jerry had done when she met him at the bridge. ' It makes you look quite grown up.'

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO YEARS AFTER.

Sweet as the primrose peeps beneath the thorn,

GOLDSMITH.

'**H**AVE you heard that the Havilands are coming back?'

It was two years after that May day described in my last chapter when Belle heard these words spoken by some gentleman who had just met another outside the bank, and she lingered a little, looking in at the window of the stationer's shop, hoping to hear a little more.

'Well, I heard that he had come into some money from some uncle, but I fancied it did not run to very much — not enough, anyhow, to keep up the old place.'

'Well, I don't know how that may be, but Bertram told me as a fact they were coming, and he ought to know. By-the-by, how do you find that new mare of yours?'

And here the conversation became uninteresting to Belle, who pursued her way to Church Cottage, where she was going, no longer for lessons, seeing she was twenty years old, but to take the old organist — quite blind now — for his daily walk.

But before she reached the cottage the name Haviland again met her ears. A piece of news pervades a country town in a surprising manner, flying round with wonderful celerity, lingering in corners and meeting you in unexpected places.

It was an old woman this time, speaking in a shrill, high-pitched voice to a man in a cart.

' Ay, 't is true, sure 'nuff, for Mr. Bertram he 's been in to know if our Rose, as lived 'ousemaid up to Poundley, is wanting a place. So they 're getting in the servants. And he says, says he, "'T will seem like old times, Mrs. Jones, to see the Havilands back ;" though it won't be like the old squire, and Master Ger — there, I can't bring myself to say Sir Gerald — ain't nothing like what his father were ! '

Belle's mind was full of Jerry, though she did not realize that it was he himself who was being discussed by high and low that day in Duckington. But the name Haviland naturally brought back the memory of that May day, which, indeed, had never been very far from her mind during those two years ; and now, when Mr. Spence asked which way they should go, she answered, ' Suppose we go towards Poundley.'

Last summer, after the hay was cut in the water meadows, she and the organist had made their way by the river-side to within sight of the Court — at least it was within her sight — and she described it to the blind man. She was always vivid in her descriptions, Mr. Spence thought, but more than ever that day ; and the old man felt as if it were all clear before his sight, color and form, shadow and sunshine,

even movement, rooks flying, heavily flapping across the scene, sudden ripples of full summer foliage in a breeze unfelt where they sat by the river; clearer perhaps in all its details than it might have been to his eyes if they could have seen, for half the world looks round them with unseeing eyes which might have gazed on the new created world fresh from the hand of God (though, for the matter of that, so is all nature still) without discovering what its Creator saw, that it was very good.

It was only once in a way that they got so far, and when the weather allowed of taking such a liberty with it, the walk often ended as soon as a satisfactory seat could be found; and as they never came out unprovided with a book in which they were more or less interested, they often did not go very far afield.

There was one particular resting-place about half a mile out of Duckington, in a lane leading out of the Poundley road, where a tree had been cut down and lay by the wayside, making a comfortable seat protected from too much sun by the hedgerow elms which stretched sheltering arms over their fallen comrade. This was a very favorite resort of the two, and here they went this morning and settled down to the book.

But whether it was the spring weather — for it was one of those enervating, balmy April days that set the most sensible people dreaming and make the youngest and most active a little bit listless — or whether it was this bit of news about the Havilands' return that had come between Belle and the biog-

raphy they were reading, and which had been very interesting the day before, I do not know, but somehow Belle's reading grew mechanical and her thoughts wandered ; and when that occurs the listener's interest is bound to wander too, even though the words follow one another correctly and the stops are well observed, and Mr. Spence grew a little sleepy in the sunshine, which poured down on his blind, upturned face as if it were trying its hardest to dazzle the sightless eyes.

'My dear,' he said apologetically, 'I can't think what is the matter with me, but I feel quite dozy.'

And Belle shut the book with great willingness, and proposed that he should have a little nap while she went over into the meadows behind to see if there were any primroses.

There was a cuckoo vociferating its glad spring news almost too emphatically, and evidently considering himself the *primo tenore* of the great new spring cantata which nature was producing ; or was she only reproducing a grand old classic dating back to early days in the garden of Eden ?

The accompaniment of the other birds was, as the musical critics would say, though they do not often say anything so pleasant, worthy of all praise, made up as it was of every tone from the deep, solemn pedal note of the rook to the silver, shrill piccolo of the wren, with an almost infinite variety in between, making up a harmony altogether far beyond art, though nature provides it in her great orchestra every spring day.

'I shall not go far away,' Belle said. Nor did she in bodily presence, though her thoughts wandered far away from the quiet, old figure sitting in the April sunshine, with his hands folded on his walking-stick and his sightless face turned up unshrinking towards the dazzling blue sky between the elm-branches, whose little red buds were too small yet to afford any shade.

Belle had found some primroses in a snug corner which had escaped the devastating eye of the purveyors for the Primrose League, under whose political zeal those lovely pale flowers are rapidly disappearing from our country lanes and roadside meadows.

What a pity it was that some noxious weed had not been associated with that justly honored name! The sentiment would have been the same, and the eradication of the emblem would really have conferred a benefit instead of an untold loss on humanity.

However, in that snug corner Belle discovered a patch of primroses growing in that exquisite grace that makes a spring picture wherever you find them. These were growing about the roots of a ragged blackthorn covered with the white flowers that tradition says bring the winter back and chill the spring gladness in the heart.

But blackthorn winter was over, and the young lambs in the next field leaped clear of the ground, all four thick woolly legs together, in sheer joy at the balmy air full of sunshine, and ba-a-ed in every variety of treble keys their funny little *Benedicite*, to which

the comfortable woolly old mothers replied with a gruff, bass, throaty ‘Amen.’

Belle had picked a little posy, not in the ruthless, sweeping manner of the before-named Primrose League purveyors, tearing up roots and scattering leaves, but daintily and politely, and a little apologetically at taking such a liberty as to interfere with the exquisite arrangements of nature. She had sat down on the grass with that noble disdain of damp and rheumatism twenty is capable of, and was tying her flowers up, when some one passing across the other end of the meadow, where there was a footpath, caught sight of her and came across the field towards her.

She did not hear him coming on the fresh, springing grass, and he was close by her before she was aware of his presence ; and he had time to notice the pretty picture she made, with her hat on the grass beside her, and the little, crisp spring breeze fluttering the dark rings on her forehead ; though it could no longer play its old tricks with the rest of her hair, which was now plaited up in a coil instead of hanging in a mane. Behind her was the primrose-starred bank and the white blackthorn, through which the sunshine came in dappled brightness on her dark head and delicate face, and on her shabby frock and the primroses in her lap. It was so bright and pure a picture, it might have been the visible realization of the song of the lark that had started up from almost under Jerry’s feet, and now was quivering nearly out of sight overhead, sending down an ecstasy of song as bright and pure.

'Why, Belle,' he said, 'I was on my way to the towing-path, and never thought of meeting you here. Did you know I had come?'

She sprang up with that same unembarrassed gladness her eyes had expressed two years ago, and then they fell before his, and the color rushed up in a burning flush over her pale face and delicate throat. She was no longer a child to look her love straight into his eyes; she was not old enough or sophisticated enough to keep it quite out of sight in the first gladness of surprise.

So, too, his name, 'Jerry,' died away from her lips with a sudden new sense of shame at calling him by his Christian name with such unmaidenly boldness.

'Why, Belle,' he said again, 'have you forgotten me? I can tell you I have not forgotten you; and I was coming right away to find you the very first day I've come home again, and now you won't even look at me. Did you know I had come home?'

'No,' she said, trying to steady a very tremulous voice and raise very shy, shining eyes composedly to meet his; 'but I was just thinking of you.'

'Were you, now?' he said, this simple, unaffected acknowledgement of her thoughts bringing home to him, with almost a feeling of awe, what a man ought to be who is admitted into the pure sanctuary of a young girl's mind, even if he does not penetrate farther into the holy of holies of her heart.

'And what made you think of such an unworthy object on such a heavenly day?'

'It was just that,' she answered, 'I always think of you in the spring.'

And she might have added, 'And in the summer, autumn, and winter too,' without much exaggeration.

'And besides,' she added, 'I heard this morning that the Havilands were coming back.'

'Ah!' he said, with a quick glance at her face as she stooped to collect the primroses scattered by her sudden movement. 'Then you found out' — he was going to say 'that I was the scapegrace Sir Gerald,' but he paused for half a second, and she went on :

'I think of you when I hear their name, for I went to Poundley with you and you told me about them. Have they come? Have you seen them?'

He hesitated a little. 'Lady Haviland has not come,' he said; 'the house is not ready for her yet. But I believe the son has come to make arrangements.'

'Is n't he very glad to come home? You know him quite well, don't you?'

'I ought to,' he answered, with a laugh; 'but sometimes I think I don't know him a bit. I certainly don't understand him just now.'

Just now that unintelligible individual was holding a slim, girlish hand in his, and looking down on a sweet young face that flushed whenever the shy eyes rose for a second and met his. I do not think it was so difficult to understand Gerald Haviland just then.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRIMROSE PATH.

Primrose, first-born child of Ver,
Merry springtime's harbinger.

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

IN days to come Gerald Haviland was inclined to think Providence had been hard on him. He had not had the slightest intention of deceiving any one or pretending to be any one but what he was. Indeed, it was so pleasant to him to feel that he was once more Gerald Haviland of Poundley, recognized as the squire by high and low, instead of just an undistinguished member of a herd of impecunious English people living abroad for economy's sake, that there was no satisfaction to him in enacting the part of the Lord of Burleigh. He quite enjoyed and looked out for the bob-curtsies and touch of the hat that greeted him, and that had been unobserved matters of course in old days ; he was pleased with the obsequious politeness of the tradesmen in Duckington, and the eagerness of old acquaintances to catch his eye and exchange recognition.

If he had thought at all of the little, dark-eyed girl—and I am afraid, in spite of what he said at their meeting, this had not been very often—it was

with the idea that he would get his mother to look her up and have her up to the Court and give her a good time now and then.

And if he had thought of her ever so much more than he did, he would never have imagined that a girl could grow up, least of all in a country town, without knowing anything of the gossip of the neighborhood, and could go on without connecting him with the master of Poundley. Why, any two ordinary schoolgirls chatting for ten minutes would easily have made four of such an obvious two and two.

But Gerald Haviland could hardly have imagined the isolated life that Belle really led in the dull, gloomy old house, where everything was settling down into a general drab shabbiness, and the monotony of Mrs. Hastings' fretful complainings, which the girl had learnt to endure with a stoical indifference which must follow when pity and sympathy are exhausted by ceaseless demand. The only variation to this was Mark's coming and going, a silent, morose man, wrapped up in his own bitterness and disappointment, who as time passed on drew the cloak of reserve closer and closer round him, and did not frighten her, as he used to do in her childish days, with sudden displays of passionate compunction and miserable affection.

And outside this, her only friend and companion was an old blind man, who grew more and more dependent on the girl both in mind and body, following her lead as much mentally in thought and feeling as he did physically when she put her hand on his

arm and led him through the fields and lanes about Duckington.

Miss Priscilla would join them now and then, but she soon got tired in her feet with their walks, and still sooner in mind with their books and talk; and she would shake her head and go back to her darning, and think it was a pity the child's head should be so full of poetry and stuff instead of devoting more attention to plain sewing.

And beyond these, Belle's social intercourse only consisted of nods and 'Good mornings,' and 'How is Mrs. Hastings to-day?' from the Mainwarings and others who had known the girl so long that they did not notice that she was a child no longer, or observe, as Gerald Haviland did that April morning, that she had grown into an unusually pretty, interesting-looking girl.

And that was another thing that Jerry had not forecast, that the little, dark-eyed, gipsy-looking child should have turned into so sweet and tender and graceful a thing as he found by the blackthorn, with the primroses in her hands, looking up at him with eyes like a young fawn, full of soft, liquid light that thrilled him and set his heart beating as if he were a lad again.

Why could she not have grown into a vulgar, commonplace country-town girl, like the doctor's daughters over there—girls who would have been delighted and satisfied with a joke and a compliment, who would have giggled and bridled and chaffed and talked nonsense as long as he pleased, and then

would be wiped from his memory till he happened upon them again, when they would be ready to repeat the process.

Why could not this girl have giggled or said some silly, affected thing with a provincial accent? He was a great connoisseur of women's voices, and perhaps a discordant voice coming even from that tender young mouth might have counteracted the sweet, shy eyes under those finely drawn, level brows, which had a quaint little upward turn over the short, sensitive nose, which gave a plaintive look to her face.

But her voice was soft and fresh and young and pleasant, even to his critical ear; and it was a voice that lingered in the memory, and he found himself recalling it and the words she had said for the rest of the day, till he felt quite angry with himself, or with her, or with Providence.

It was not as if he were a love-sick boy carried away by any pretty face or graceful figure; and even as he came down from Poundley that morning, he had been taking a most matter-of-fact and unsentimental survey of his future life, in which marriage meant a substantial addition to his income; and he had congratulated himself on being well past the time of life when a marriage of convenience would be a grievous trial, and his mind had dwelt with equanimity on a certain widow of his acquaintance, perhaps a few years his senior, but very presentable and elegant, and endowed with a fortune that would go far to reinstate Poundley.

Life, he thought, would be very endurable with this lady to sit at the head of his table and preside over his house ; and her house in Mayfair would be a pleasing variety from Poundley, and they had many tastes in common, and she would be acceptable to his mother.

But when, that afternoon, a note from his mother reached him, announcing that she hoped to persuade dear Mrs. Trevor to accompany her to stay for a few days at Poundley, he gave a little exclamation of impatience, and remembered with vividness that the late Mr. Trevor had made his money in trade, and that his widow had false teeth.

He had not the least wish to keep up the deception with Belle as he walked by her side to where the organist sat dozing ; the words were half said to put an end to the silly joke. Well, at any rate it could not last after they had reached Mr. Spence, for he had met the organist before, and recognition could not fail to follow their meeting.

But the eyes that turned inquiringly to him as they approached contained no recognition ; as how should they, when Phoebus Apollo himself could make no difference to those sightless eyes ?

But for the first moment Jerry did not realize that he was blind, and his cordial greeting and reference to former meetings hesitated before such an entire want of recognition ; and in that moment Belle said : ‘I have met an old friend of mine, Mr. Jerry —?’ She paused, with a little interrogative glance at Jerry, as she did not know his surname ; and he, out of ‘sheer cussedness,’ as he felt the next minute, said

'Marston,' and heard himself introduced to the organist by that name.

It was quite true, though not the whole truth, Gerald Marston Haviland being his name.

Mr. Spence, with that wonderful keenness of hearing and memory which many blind people possess, listened as Gerald talked, with a fidgety sense of having heard the voice before.

'My dear,' the organist said wonderingly as they wended their way slowly back to Duckington after parting with Jerry, 'I wonder you never told me about this friend of yours.'

'Yes; I wonder too,' said Belle, with that thrill in her voice of the springtime and love and happiness.

'I think I must have heard his voice before,' he went on. 'What is he like, Belle?'

'Like?' She hardly knew herself; certainly not like any other man in the very unheroic world of Duckington; and she, who was generally so vivid in her descriptions, hesitated and contradicted herself so that Mr. Spence was left with a very hazy notion of some one resembling Mr. Pilditch the chemist, who was Belle's special aversion.

'Is he a friend of Mark's?'

'No. I don't think Mark knows him.' Which was not so surprising to the organist as it might have been, as Mark's surly unsociability was a matter of general comment. Neither could she give any definite information as to where this friend of hers lived, only surmising vaguely that it must be somewhere in the Poundley direction.

‘ Do you know the name of Marston ? ’ Mr. Spence asked his sister that afternoon, and, being a little hard of hearing, she gave him a long and irrelevant history of some one of the name of Morton, who had been dead now for many years ; to which he listened meekly, knowing that, when once started, it was impossible to stem the flow of information.

‘ Marston ? Then why did you call it Morton ? Marston ? Of course I do ; and so do you, or I’m much mistaken. Now, don’t you remember that Dissenting minister at Petherwick with the cross eyes, that had all his children down with typhoid, and pretty near all of them died ? Could n’t have been one of them if they died ? Well, if you ’d listen for a minute, perhaps you ’d have let me say that there was one who did n’t die, though he was always delicate, with one shoulder higher than the other, and a bit of a limp when he walked. Depend upon it, that was him ; and if you come across him again, you just ask him to step in and have a cup of tea, and tell him I remember his mother well, a good sort of body, run to death pretty well by that husband of hers and all those sickly children.’

But the organist, though experience had taught him not to attempt to correct false impressions, could not bring himself to believe that the poor deformed son of a squinting minister could have put the gladness into the girl’s voice, and the spring into her step, and the tremulous warmth into the little hand that had guided him home.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. TREVOR.

Put money in thy purse. — SHAKESPEARE.

MRS. TREVOR was a very good woman of business, besides possessing many other more charming, if less useful qualities. In general society, however, it was her rôle to affect almost childish ignorance in matters of £ s. d., but her lawyer could have testified that she had quite as keen a notion of profit and loss as her husband had possessed, though it had enabled him to amass all those thousands which he had left to his wife.

But she took a broad view of profit and loss, which is more than most women do, who will lose a pound while they are haggling over sixpence ; and though she would not have said it in its open, coarse brutality, she was quite aware that the marriage between herself and Gerald Haviland, which had been openly discussed in fashionable circles, and even hinted at in society papers, was in the nature of a bargain, with a *quid pro quo* expected on either side.

On her side, of course, there was the money, and of such a substantial amount that no one asked how it had been acquired. The owner of such wealth might have dropped his *h's*, put his knife in his

mouth, and murdered the Queen's English with impunity ; but the late Mr. Trevor had not presumed upon his position to such an extent as this, and his widow was above all suspicion in such matters, perhaps, if anything, being a little too elegant and refined for thorough good breeding.

Of course she was a little *passée* ; but she was one of those women who improve up to middle age, especially when nature is ably supported by art, and I fancy she was very much better-looking now than she had been as a girl at Clapham when Mr. Trevor married her.

Even Lady Haviland, who was critical of her own sex, and especially of such as aspired to be her son's wife, could find little to object to in Mrs. Trevor, who was always irreproachably dressed, elegantly mannered, and not obtrusively bedight with diamonds ; though on suitable occasions few could compete with her in this last respect.

She was a clever woman, too, with that best of all cleverness — adaptability ; so that she could suit her conversation to almost any society she was in, and, without Lady Haviland's subtle charm, which is an independent gift of itself, was generally pleasing.

And what had Gerald Haviland to offer in exchange? First of all, there was himself ; and though, as I have said, this marriage was mainly a matter of business, Mrs. Trevor freely acknowledged to herself, as she reckoned the pros and cons, that she liked the man himself, and that his goodly inches, and broad shoulders, and fair, handsome face, and his easy,

aristocratic manners, did not go for nothing in the scale against her money-bags, filled so successfully by her late, little, bald-headed tub of a husband.

Then there was his historic title and his long family tree — a plant that does not grow much at Clapham ; and though her confidential maid used to murmur, when her mistress was *en grande tenue*, that nothing below a duke or a ‘hearl’ would be worthy of her, dukes and earls are not as plentiful as blackberries, and what there are are mostly snapped up by Americans.

Then there was Poundley, a fine old place from all she could hear, which would greatly repay the outlay of a little money ; and it had always been her ambition to be the possessor of such a place, the gilded glories of a parvenu having palled on her.

So, as she travelled down to Duckington with Lady Haviland, she felt she was laying out her money to advantage ; and it very much took off the sordid sense of barter, feeling that Gerald Haviland was young and good-looking, a man that any woman might marry out of sheer love and nothing else ; and she herself had before now won hearts quite irrespective of her money-bags, and might well, her glass assured her, even yet do the same. And she found herself, just for a few minutes, imagining herself a penniless girl wooed by Gerald Haviland, without that hideous load of debt on his back which made a rich wife such a necessity to him.

It was quite refreshing to find that she could be so girlishly silly ; and she regretted when more matter-

of-fact things, such as settlements, and resetting of family jewels, and refurnishing her town house, sprang up and choked the sickly, little shoot of sentimentality that had tried to assert itself.

Sir Gerald was at the Duckington station to meet his mother and Mrs. Trevor, assiduous in his attentions and care for their comfort, in his fears lest they should be tired by the journey, or that he should have overlooked something in his arrangements for their reception — all said as if he included both ladies, but by his manner subtly conveyed that it was specially meant for one.

There was not wanting the slight pressure of the hand as he helped her from the carriage ; the soft *empressement* of the manner in which he bid her welcome, as if her coming were an event of very great importance to him ; the pleasure and pride with which he received her expressions of admiration of the sweet spring country as they drove along ; and the first view of the old house as the turn of the drive brought them in sight of it. And yet — and yet — I think, after all, Mrs. Trevor must have been a little in love with Gerald Haviland, and that it was not such a mere matter of business, as she detected almost in the first ten minutes an indefinable difference — something wanting that had been there when last they met, hardly three weeks ago — something that set the possession of this grand old place, far finer and more imposing than she had expected, a good deal farther off than it had seemed as she thought of it in the train an hour before.

It was only her fancy, she told herself as her maid dressed her for dinner that evening. It was another instance of youthful silliness to be fanciful as well as sentimental.

No one could have been more assiduous, more *empressé*, more devoted than Sir Gerald as he brought her into the old hall, with its dark oak panelling, and the quaint armor, and the banners hanging overhead, and the family portraits, one of which, over the fire-place, might for all the world have been himself in fancy dress. His whole manner was that of a man introducing his bride to her future home, not merely welcoming a passing visitor, who would come and go and receiye only the ordinary courtesy and hospitality.

And yet she felt puzzled, and that is not a feeling to be encouraged if you consider the becoming, especially if you have to beware of little lines deepening and crow's feet asserting themselves. Puzzle has a tendency to draw two lines between the eyebrows and accentuate those at the corners of the mouth.

Mrs. Parsons, her maid, found her mistress in a very irritable condition — ‘As cross as two pins,’ as she described it. Nothing was right. First she would wear one dress, then another; now she could not be too plain and simple, and next minute she would be dressed as if she were going to a ball; and when her hair was pretty well done, it must all come down again, and be put up quite differently; and even so it did not please.

‘Why, she 've been to Court without half the fuss !

And nobody to dinner as I could make out but half-a-dozen old fogies of no particular account. And if it was all to please Sir Gerald, she might just have saved herself and me all the trouble, for I don't suppose he'd notice if she had her dressing-gown on, for any one as has eyes can see as it's not her but her money-bags he wants to marry ; and he'd do it just the same if she was as old as Methusalem, and as ugly.'

A man, they say, is never a hero to his valet ; still less is a woman a heroine to her maid, though I do not believe the rule in either case is infallible, as, for example, Lady Haviland's little Swiss maid worshipped the ground her mistress stepped on, and would have gone to the stake before she would have allowed that her ladyship had any human weakness.

But Mrs. Parsons made a mistake in thinking that Sir Gerald would not notice what Mrs. Trevor wore. He realized with an almost exasperating clearness every detail of her toilet, her slight, elegant figure, the grace with which she moved as she swept into the drawing-room at dinner-time, the rich simplicity of her dress, even the costliness of the lace that lay so softly round the white neck and shoulders, that were still fair and smooth, and the good taste that had altogether abstained from diamonds.

He grudgingly allowed the entire suitability of her appearance, and noticed how the dark oak-panelling set off her beauty, and how eminently calculated she was to be the mistress of Poundley.

A month ago all this would have pleased him, but now he was almost feverishly seeking for something to take exception to, and Mrs. Trevor was indefinitely conscious of something adverse and unwilling in his admiration.

She noticed, too, that his attention wandered, and that he answered almost at random ; and especially once, when Mr. Caxton, who was one of the guests at dinner that evening, was talking to Lady Haviland.

It was only about an old organist who had lost his sight, and about whom Lady Haviland expressed great interest. Mrs. Trevor wondered if the interest were real or assumed, and if it was a necessary part of the rôle of a country gentleman's wife to interest herself in the lower orders ; and if so, whether she herself could acquire it.

Or perhaps it was only part of Lady Haviland's strange fascination, which Mrs. Trevor could never quite understand, to talk of subjects about which she cared nothing for the sake of interesting her listeners, and no doubt this old clergyman had no ideas beyond his humble, country-town neighbors.

But when she turned with a remark to Sir Gerald, and he answered at haphazard, with eyes and ears and whole attention riveted on what Mr. Caxton was saying, Mrs. Trevor, besides being a little bit ruffled at such a very unusual want of attention to herself, began to think that these country gentry were terribly local, and to have serious apprehensions that she might be bored if this was the usual style of things.

‘Poor, dear old man !’ Lady Haviland was say-

ing. ‘Quite blind, do you say? I must certainly go down and see him. Does he still play the organ at Duckington?’

‘He is supposed to; but I fancy Mark Hastings does the main part of it, and a great deal better than the old man ever did. And his little sister leads the old man about. I have seen them twice lately up in this direction—that day, Sir Gerald, when you and I——’

But Sir Gerald’s attention had suddenly returned to his neighbor, with a little heightened color, no doubt from compunction at his breach of good manners, and an indistinct sense of a remark of hers to which he had paid no heed; so Mr. Caxton’s appeal to him across the table passed unnoticed, and when next Sir Gerald’s ear caught the conversation at the other end of the table, it was on the subject of Italian music, which apparently had not such a distracting effect on his mind, and Mrs. Trevor had no further reason for complaint.

Later, when the ladies were retiring to their rooms, and were bidding Sir Gerald good-night in the hall, Mrs. Trevor paused before the big, open fireplace, and looked up at the portrait set in the panel above it. She knew that she made a graceful picture as she stood there in her softly tinted satin dress, with the light from the many wax-candles in sconces on the walls falling on her upturned face and fair shoulders, which gleamed pearly white against the dark oak.

By the way, she had already made up her mind that electricity must be introduced. Candles were

all very well, and might be more in keeping ; but the black oak regularly sucked the light in ; and though, perhaps, such dimness was picturesque, it would certainly, in the long-run, be depressing.

‘One of your ancestors, Sir Gerald?’ she said.
‘What a wonderful likeness !’

‘I suppose there is,’ he answered. ‘It has been noticed before.’

But as he spoke Mrs. Trevor had vanished completely from before his eyes, and all the pretty effects she had reckoned on as so telling were as nothing beside the recollection of a half-grown slip of a girl, shabbily dressed, with only the sweet grace of nature and artlessness, looking at him with frank young eyes, and saying : ‘Oh Jerry, do look here ! The picture is exactly like you.’

CHAPTER XI.

A WOOD IN SPRING.

When proud-pied April, dress'd in all its trim,
Hath put a spirit of youth in everything.

SHAKESPEARE.

THERE is a certain wood a little way off the road between Duckington and Poundley, on which Belle and many another besides had cast longing eyes. Adventurous spirits who had climbed the stile, in spite of the notice overhead that trespassers would be prosecuted, reported that primroses grew there of abnormal size and in vast quantities, and even from outside you could see a mist of bluebells making wondrous fairyland in May; while as for the blackberries in autumn, none such grew anywhere else, if you could believe half that was reported of them; though I doubt if any one could attest the fact, seeing that a keeper with a gun on his shoulder was often to be seen at the stile to emphasize the warning of the notice-board.

But Jerry boldly defied both the notice-board and the keeper, and helped the old organist over the stile and led him along the path into the very heart of the wood; and to go into the heart of a wood in early

May is, even to a blind man, to enter fairyland, such a rich feast of warm scents, such a sweet chorus of bird-voices, such tender little breezes laden with suggestions of growing, living things, such dainty kisses of sunbeams between young leaves, are to be met with there.

And if it was fairyland to an old blind man whose senses were not so keen, from the subtle drowsiness that creeps on so imperceptibly in old age, when our long bedtime approaches, what was it to a girl of twenty, with all her faculties keenly alive—seeing, hearing, breathing, loving?

‘There is a time to love,’ said the Preacher, and surely that time is May.

‘I’ll make it all right with the keeper,’ Jerry said ; and so he apparently did, for the next time that stalwart velveteened and begaitered form appeared and Belle felt an inward tremor at sight of the gun on his shoulder, he only saluted and bade them ‘good morning,’ as if it did not run up against all the prejudices of a keeper’s soul to see a petticoat in one of his very best pheasant preserves.

‘You’re sure it’s all right?’ Mr. Spence protested. ‘I know Sir Giles was very particular about his coverts, and I’ve heard it said that his son is more so, and I should n’t like to do anything to annoy him, just as he’s coming home too.’

‘Oh, don’t worry yourself. I’ll make it all right,’ was the reassuring answer; ‘only don’t say anything about it in Duckington or there will be a flood of primrose-gatherers and picnickers, and the place

will be spoilt, and Sir Gerald might n't — in fact, I 'm sure he would n't like it.'

So the organist said nothing of the privilege extended to him and Belle, of which they availed themselves every day ; not even mentioning it to his sister, knowing by experience that that was the way to open the floodgates and let a piece of news overrun Duckington generally in a garbled form.

As for Belle, she had no one to tell, as Mrs. Hastings was more ailing and irritable just then, and, though she complained bitterly to Mark of how lonely and deserted she was, and of the long dull hours she spent alone, would not allow Belle to do anything for her, or even, very often, sit in the same room with her ; and Mark did not invite confidences nor offer them.

I think that drowsiness of advancing age must have been heavy on the old man for him to have acquiesced so easily and unsuspiciously in these constant meetings with Belle's friend, of whose very existence he had been unaware until that April morning ; for it very rarely happened, during the fortnight that followed, that Jerry did not join the two in that woodland fairyland, when, after the first few minutes, the old organist would drop out of the talk or grow sleepy, and Jerry and Belle would wander away together through the wood.

I think it was partly that Mr. Spence did not realize that Belle was anything more than a little girl. She was still to him the child he had peered at with his dimming sight, and he had not the least idea that

she was a grown-up girl, and an unusually pretty one, too. Nor did he realize that Jerry Marston was young and likewise good-looking, having, as I said before, received a very halting and unsatisfactory description of him from Belle's usually graphic tongue.

And it was pleasant and warm and sunshiny, and perhaps we get a little bit selfish as we get old, though I am sure even then the old man would have been roused to energy and action by the least suspicion of any danger threatening Belle.

And still Gerald Haviland went drifting on, angry with himself for doing so, resolving constantly just to finish it up, and tell them who he was and have done with it, or just to keep away from the wood for a bit, and make a break in what was every day becoming so strong a fascination as to be almost irresistible, or just give the keeper a hint to warn off the old man and the girl, saying he had orders from Sir Gerald to do so, which same the keeper would only have been too pleased to carry into effect.

What a fool he was to introduce this complication into his life, which was just then so simple and plain-sailing ! And what could it possibly lead to ? There was no harm in it ; of course there was no harm ! He was not such a villain as to harm a child, and Belle was a child to him, and he was old enough to be her grandfather, he would protest to himself, with that exaggeration which people use when they don't believe, or want other people to believe, what they say.

It was refreshing to any one to have to do with

such an unsophisticated, natural child, without any affectation or humbug or second-hand ideas. She had no silly notions of men being in love with her ; she was not on the lookout for flirtation ; she hardly understood a compliment. He was quite sure her liking for him was not the least bit sentimental. Oh yes, he was quite sure ! And then he found himself remembering one day, when he was helping her down a bank and held her just for a minute in his arms — a minute that was perhaps just a little longer than it need have been — what a sweet, rich blush ran up into her face, and how fast her heart beat against his, which did not keep such even composure as a grandfatherly heart should.

And then there was that day — well, he blamed himself for that ; but it only went to show how entirely he regarded her as a child, and it should never occur again. She had a thorn in her hand, and he had to take it out ; and, her little hand being in his and he bending over it, he had done as he would have done to a child — kissed it to make it well. She had pulled her hand away quickly with a startled look, and again ‘suddenly, sweetly, strangely blushed.’ But she thought nothing more of it, she had forgotten all about it, he assured himself ; though why he should have endowed her with such a short memory and philosophical indifference to what is generally an event in a maiden’s life — a lover’s first kiss — is rather incomprehensible, more especially as he thought about it himself a good deal. But then he was not a lover, he would have protested. He had

not spoken a word of love ; there was nothing that all the world might not have heard ; it made no difference if Mr. Spence were listening or not.

But it was the day that Lady Haviland was to arrive, bringing with her Mrs. Trevor, with that understood intention which up to now had been quite to his satisfaction, that Gerald first discovered that if Belle's feelings were so stoical and composed, if her maiden meditation were still so fancy free that she could quietly and contentedly let this growing intimacy between them slip away and disappear, it was certainly not so with him ; and this little, unformed slip of a girl had got such a hold on him that he could not break away from the subtle, tenacious hold. ‘The Philistines be upon thee, Samson,’ the Philistines in this case being Lady Haviland, with her gentle grace, and elegant Mrs. Trevor. But the Samson could not get up and break like tow the cords of love with which this unconscious, innocent Delilah had bound him.

It was no use calling himself a fool ; it was no use denying the fact ; and, worse than all, it was no use trying to devise some plan for making the sweet idyllic dream possible.

He had let himself go once, one evening when he had seen a young workman at his cottage door with his wife, so newly wed that they were sweethearts still. It was in the dusk, so that he could not see the details that might have spoiled the picture, or detect that the man was rough and grimy from his day's work, and the woman coarse and frowsy. The spring

twilight was merciful to such defects, and the glow from the fire through the open door gave a warm home look to the scene as the man put his arm round the girl and they passed in together.

And as Gerald went on he let himself imagine just for a few foolish moments the sweet Arcadia of such a life for Belle and himself, without the falseness and emptiness of society and fashion ; just the old, ridiculous dream of love in a cottage, which has been so often derided and held up to scorn that you would have thought it must have been exploded ages ago ; a life without dress-clothes, or late dinners, or clubs, or servants, or anything, in fact, makes life worth living.

He laughed at himself the moment after for such childish nonsense, and was glad no one could read his thoughts.

It was so manifestly impossible that he, Gerald Haviland, should marry a penniless girl, the daughter or adopted child of a fraudulent banker ; for Jerry had found out all there was to know about Belle, though he had let her know so little in return.

Even if he had not inherited his uncle's money, and so had a chance of coming back to Poundley, it would have been out of the question. Or if that money had been sufficient to allow of his marrying whom he would, without considering the *dot* his wife would bring him, he could hardly have made up his mind to present to his mother a daughter-in-law with such doubtful antecedents. But now that the whole situation depended on a rich marriage, to prevent the

home-coming from being merely a miserable fiasco, it would be madness to let a sentimental feeling stand in the way of its accomplishment.

He could reason himself into a most sensible frame of mind, but the reason and sense alike disappeared when he came along the woodland path and Belle lifted sweet, glad eyes to greet him.

If only there had been a few pouring wet days, or a searching, biting, cruel east wind such as so often spoils our English May, it would have made it easier to end this lunatic day-dream ; but here again Providence was hard on Gerald Haviland, and permitted a May of exceptional beauty, balmy and bright, with a seductive languor that made it well-nigh impossible to keep rigorously and sternly out of the way of temptation.

He had enough self-control to keep away the first few days his mother and Mrs. Trevor were at Poundley ; but he was restless and absent-minded, and more than once he caught Mrs. Trevor's eyes looking curiously at him, and was conscious that he had been thinking of the green coolness of the wood, and of Belle sitting on that mossy tree-stump, watching and listening and waiting, and of the look of disappointment that was settling down on the sweet young face.

It is lucky for us that the Röntgen rays have not yet been discovered that will perhaps some day reveal our thoughts to one another !

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXPLANATION.

Bring the primrose that forsaken dies,
With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head.

MILTON.

'GERALD,' Lady Haviland said a few days later when they met at lunch, 'Alice and I have made a grand discovery.'

Gerald was not in a very amiable frame of mind just then, for he had given way to an overpowering temptation and not got any satisfaction out of it, which is one of the most disappointing things that can befall mortal man, for you have not your self-respect to fall back upon.

On his way to Duckington he had left his horse at a little farm half-way, and had made his way across the meadows to that wood we know of, rating himself all the time for his weakness and folly, and still with an almost childlike exhilaration of spirits and the feeling of a naughty boy playing truant from school, and a vivid anticipation of pleasure at seeing Belle again, and perhaps still more at seeing the look of delight in her eyes.

He approached cautiously, treading on the soft moss and parting the branches with as little noise as pos-

sible ; but when he reached the small clearing in the middle of the wood, there was no one there, and a robin perched on the mossy tree-stump looked impertinently at him, as if he knew he had come on a fool's errand.

And though he waited half-an-hour and smoked several cigarettes, nobody came ; and the wood was hot, and the midges kept biting him, and the keeper who met him leaving the wood, grinned as he touched his hat.

And he found when he reached Duckington that this half-hour's delay had made him too late for an important appointment, and his temper was not improved as he rode past the church by seeing his mother's victoria in front of the organist's house.

So he did not respond with much animation to his mother's remark at luncheon, being also annoyed at the use of Mrs. Trevor's Christian name, which implied greater familiarity than was the case.

He had once or twice pretended not to know whom his mother meant by 'Alice,' but it was impossible to do so now, as Mrs. Trevor was present, and there were only the three at luncheon.

'Indeed?' he said. 'I congratulate you.' But he did not display much interest, being more intent on instructing an Aberdeen terrier how to balance a piece of biscuit on his nose.

'We have discovered the prettiest thing in the neighborhood.'

'Ah!' said Gerald. 'One, two, three ; now, Rob.'

'You know the old blind organist?'

'Wuff! wuff!' barked Rob, having been suddenly defrauded of a piece of biscuit which he had honestly and laboriously earned, and squinted at as it rested on the end of his nose for half a minute; and being young and inexperienced, he protested at such injustice, and was forthwith flicked at with a dinner-napkin, and retired in dudgeon under the table.

'What! old Spence? Well, he's not particularly pretty.'

'No,' said Mrs. Trevor, who had been observant of the treatment of Rob. 'But there was really quite a sweetly pretty little girl there, was there not, Lady Haviland? We both of us quite fell in love with her. Perhaps you have seen her, Sir Gerald?'

'If you mean Miss Priscilla, I know her quite well; but ——'

'Oh, Gerald, how can you be so absurd? Miss Priscilla, indeed! That was Mr. Spence's sister, Alice; the old thing in a black cap who opened the door. No; I think the girl's name was Nelly, and she is some one who comes in and reads to the old man and takes him out for walks. I don't know when I have seen such a pretty child; and her eyes were like a fawn's, and such pretty, unaffected manners, quite simple and a little shy, but not a bit country-townish or awkward.'

'She was n't one of the Mainwarings?'

'My dear Gerald! I will take you one day to call on the Mainwarings, Alice, that you may see some typical country-town productions. But I think we saw one of them on a bicycle as we came back. She

is rather substantial for a bicycle, and she was racing with a very slight youth, and they were both doing what I believe is technically called scorching.'

The conversation had turned from Belle very satisfactorily, Gerald thought ; but Mrs. Trevor brought it back.

' You will have an opportunity of seeing this beauty, Sir Gerald ; for Lady Haviland has asked her to come up one afternoon with the old man.'

' She told me she had once been here. I suppose it was when we were away. I didn't know the Cotterells let people go over the house and see the pictures ; but they seem to have done so, for this child was greatly impressed with the beauties of poor old Poundley. I thought they might come up to tea one afternoon, and she can see the pictures and the old man play on the organ in the gallery ; though I fancy he is rather past doing much in the way of music, even if he ever had much capacity that way. I should really like you to see her, Gerald ; she is like some picture I have seen. I think it may have been a Madonna at Florence, but you would know in a minute if you saw her.'

Gerald knew quite well which picture his mother was thinking of, and that it was the little, inquiring, plaintive turn of the eyebrow that caused the resemblance.

' Who is she ? ' he asked.

Rob, forgiving past injuries and greedy of more biscuit, had been enticed back, and formed a convenient excuse for abrupt changes of conversation, with

his long black nose, and shrewd, bright eyes, and cocked, hairy ears, and general solemnity and alertness of demeanor.

'Well, I thought you would be sure to know ; but the old man says he has not come across you since you came home. I wish you would go in and see him one day ; it would gratify him so much. They say they often come in this direction ; and there was something about a wood that some one has given them leave to go into, and he hopes you won't mind. I could not quite make out about it ; but I said he had better have it out with you if he has been trespassing, so do set the old man's mind at rest as soon as you can.'

As Gerald Haviland walked up and down on the terrace after luncheon that day smoking his cigarette, he made up that perplexing thing he called his mind that he would make an end of this folly before another day was over ; that he would go down to Duckington then and there, directly he had finished that cigarette, and see the old organist, and just tell him how, by way of a joke, he had never told them he was Sir Gerald Haviland. Somehow all appearance of a joke had disappeared from the matter, and the more he looked at it the less amusing it seemed. But that must be the view of the matter placed before Mr. Spence, and no doubt he would pass on this exquisite pleasantry to Belle — Belle, with her startled fawn eyes, that looked so absolutely true.

Mrs. Trevor, watching him from the drawing-room window, noticed an irritable stamp of the foot as this

thought passed through his mind, or rather took possession of it, and guessed, as she had done at luncheon, that there was something annoying him, and that that something was connected with the organist's girl companion.

Her experience of the world had not led her to put a favorable construction on the interest a young man like Sir Gerald was likely to take in a girl like this. Even though Sir Gerald was the man she was willing to accept as her husband, it would hardly have lowered him perceptibly in her estimation if she had come on half-a-dozen clandestine love-affairs, and even though the girl had impressed her world-hardened and suspicious eye as being sweet and innocent and pure, she hardly pitied her.

She looked at Sir Gerald, standing at the end of the terrace, lighting another cigarette (he lit several after that one that was to be the last before he went down to Duckington), with a kindly, little smile of tolerance ; while when she thought of Belle the lines tightened about her mouth and her eyes grew hard, for the girl was young and certainly very lovely, and these are things difficult to forgive in a rival. ‘ How simple Lady Haviland is ! ’ she thought, with that contemptuous superiority of the worldly-wise, who have lost faith, poor souls ! in purity and truth, and accordingly despise the pure, to whom all things are pure.

When Gerald knocked at the door of Church Cottage rather late in the afternoon, having virtuously avoided both the wood and the towing-path for fear of temptation, he was quite prepared with the light,

jocular tone he was going to adopt with Mr. Spence, but the wind was altogether taken out of his sails by the door being opened by Belle herself.

Mr. Spence had one of his bad headaches, she told him, and Miss Priscilla had gone out; so she was left in charge, and had just succeeded in reading the old man to sleep.

'Any little excitement gives him these bad headaches now,' she said, 'and he had some visitors this morning. But come in, won't you? It won't disturb him; he is quite sound asleep.'

So he followed her into the little parlor with the small-paned, heavily framed window looking out over the churchyard and its quiet old graves, and sat down by her side in the deep window-seat, on Miss Priscilla's patchwork cushion.

A quaint old room with panelled walls, and the fireplace in one corner, with a little round mirror over it in a heavy old frame. There was the organist's American organ, with its yellow keys, and the carpet on the treadles worn to shreds, and the neat pile of music by the side, which was no longer in use.

There was Miss Priscilla's work-basket, with a heap of socks; and just over it, on the wall, a sampler hanging, worked by her in days gone by with figures and letters and odd little stiff houses and trees. And there were various other signs of the old lady's presence in the shape of crochet antimacassars and wool mats, and some fearful and wonderful photographs on the walls; while another influence showed

itself by a tall glass of daffodils and a heap of books, one of which lay open on the table. Every detail of the little room was stamped on Jerry's memory for many a day.

They had to speak in low tones, for in the next room the organist lay asleep, and through the open door they could hear his breathing and the tick-tock of the eight-day clock, counting out at once the slow, failing pulse of the old life and the full, rich heart-beats of the young.

'Who do you think his visitors were?' Belle was asking. 'Why, Lady Haviland and another lady. Is n't Lady Haviland lovely? You know her, don't you? I think she is quite the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.'

'And the other lady, Belle?'

A doubtful look crossed the girl's face.

'Have you seen her, Jerry? I am not sure. She is very elegant, and quite what my idea of a fine lady is. I should think she must be some one very grand. I have been thinking of her a great deal this afternoon, for Miss Priscilla says she is the lady that Sir Gerald is going to marry; so, for Lady Haviland's sake, she ought to be very nice, ought n't she, Jerry?'

'And not for Sir Gerald's?'

'Oh yes, of course, for his too. But I have been thinking of her as Lady Haviland's daughter-in-law, and I am not sure that she is quite good enough. Miss Priscilla says she is very rich, but I don't suppose Sir Gerald would marry her just for that if he did n't care for her.'

'Would n't he? Why not? Such marriages are made every day.'

He was watching her face as she talked. It was so near the end of this little tender episode, he felt he might let himself go just a little bit, let something speak from his eyes, let something sound from his voice, let himself bend a little nearer till his hand on the old window-ledge touched hers, which trembled with the same thrill that vibrated through him. And then his fingers closed over hers, and that dangerous silence fell between them that is more eloquent than words; and suddenly their eyes met, and he put his arm round her and drew her head to rest on his shoulder.

'Not a word of love!' He used to try and comfort himself with this fact in days to come, but not even on that most credulous listener, himself, could he impose this fallacy when he thought of the small dark head on his shoulder, and the soft outline of the rose-tinted cheek on which he looked down, and the tumultuous beating of the girl's heart, that he could feel against his arm, a tumult that corresponded to the passionate agitation in his. Words are not needed to give expression to love.

Was it seconds, minutes, hours before the old man stirred in the next room and Belle rose to go to him? There was a certain guiltiness in the way Jerry's arm dropped from its hold of her, but there was none in the girl as she stood looking down on her lover with great, soft, shining eyes of shy love and happiness and trust, a look that Jerry never forgot, and that,

sweet and pure as it was, rankled like a poisoned arrow for long afterwards.

Then she went in to attend to her patient ; and when she came back Jerry was standing with his back to her and his hands in his pockets, looking fixedly out of the window at a tumble-down mossy tomb-stone, on which was visible a death's-head and cross-bones, sacred to the memory of some one long since forgotten.

'Belle,' he began in a hard, distinct tone which stopped the girl at the threshold, and made the warm color ebb from her cheeks with a sudden chill of fear. 'There's something I want to say to you, and I came this afternoon on purpose to say it.'

If it had not been for the tone of his voice the girl would have laughed. It was so obvious what he had to say to her ; it had all been said in that time of silence when heart spoke to heart without need of words, and she made a step forward as if to go to him and put her hand in his.

But he did not turn, and he went on as if he had been saying a lesson.

'I have come to say good-bye.'

'Are you going away ?'

'Yes, never to come back. At any rate, the Jerry you knew will never come back. He wasn't a bad sort, that Jerry. Don't think badly of him. Remember him kindly sometimes.'

'I don't understand,' she said tremulously. 'Jerry, I don't understand.'

She had come nearer as he spoke, and now was

close behind him, and she stretched out one little hand and touched his arm, but he took no apparent notice and never turned. How could he dare? or trust himself to see her face?

'Perhaps it would be better to say, "Forget all about him," for there never has been such a person. This Gerald Haviland who has made such a fool of himself, and has to marry a rich wife to save his family from ruin, is a very different sort of fellow.'

'I don't understand, Jerry. Of course he is.'

'And yet,' he said, with a rough, hard sort of laugh, 'he happens to be the very same.'

'I — don't — understand.'

'It is not so very difficult,' he said, almost harshly. 'I am Gerald Haviland, at your service.'

'You?'

'Yes; and the most miserable man in the world!'

CHAPTER XIII.

BROTHER MARK.

Give sorrow words ; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erwrought heart and bids it break.

SHAKESPEARE.

MARK could not make out if it was the death of the old organist that had made such a change in Belle.

It was her first close experience of death ; for, of course, when Mr. Hastings died she was too much of a child to realize the great solemn fact. It was very sudden, too. The old man had been apparently in his usual health, and the very day he died Lady Haviland had been in to see him, and he had been very bright and cheerful, and pleased, as every one must be, with the gracious charm of her manner.

He had complained of headache in the middle of the day, and when Miss Priscilla went out in the afternoon he was lying down, with Belle reading to him, and seemed better. Miss Priscilla had a long job that day, reviewing all the bed-linen at Mr. Caxton's, and, knowing that Belle was with him, she did not hurry back, but had a cup of tea with the house-keeper, and went on with her work till the twilight began to make threading her needle difficult.

The house had been very quiet when she went in.

There is a sort of quiet about death that seems almost more than an absence of sound, and the tick-tock of the clock seemed rather to add to than break the silence that reigned.

Miss Priscilla's bustling entrance called forth no greeting from within, and when she called 'Belle! Belle!' there was no answer, so she concluded the girl had gone home.

But when she struck a light and went into the organist's room, Belle started up from where she knelt by the bedside, with a dazzled face, white and drawn and strange.

'But,' Miss Priscilla said, 'the odd thing was, she did not know that he was dead; the child thought he was just sleeping; and, dear heart! any one might have thought the same to look at him, sleeping like a baby, with a smile as showed he hadn't had any pain. He must have been dead an hour or more, and Belle said she remembered his giving a little sigh and then settling off, as she thought, into a more quiet sleep; but the child seemed so dazed and strange, I could not make her out. She was like any one stunned and half-stupid, and she did not shed a tear, but she kept saying, "If only it might have been me instead of him!" A young thing like that, with all her life—and, please God! that a happy life—before her, and he with his threescore years and ten, and blind and all, and glad to go when it pleased God, as he'd often said to me, though he was wonderful contented and patient under his affliction, was poor James.'

The shock had certainly been very great, and there was that want of occupation which makes a loss more keenly felt ; but Belle felt like a hypocrite when her wan looks and broken spirits were all set down to the depth of her feeling for her old friend. His death seemed so light a thing by the side of the loss of her lover—that bright, splendid springtime lover of hers, who was gone more completely than if the death, who must have been in waiting when Jerry held her in his arms, had laid his bony hand on him instead of on the old man in the next room.

Death is so much less of a separation than that which had parted her and Jerry. Death, anyhow, cannot take away beautiful, dear memory, or make past happiness meaningless and unreal.

She tried to protest when Mark was taking her home that night, holding her hand as if she were still a child, and comforting her with that deep tenderness that was kept so rigidly out of sight in general ; and she repelled Mrs. Hastings' fretful attempt at sympathy, confirming that lady's deep-seated conviction that she was heartless and cold-blooded ; and when the Mainwarings, in the kindness of their hearts, overwhelmed her with effusive condolences, she laughed, and was so odd and brusque that they were quite puzzled, being themselves simply constructed, and not able to understand more complex natures.

As long as Miss Priscilla would let her sit by the bedside there seemed still a link with the bright past, some one who, though still and unresponsive, still

knew Jerry, and would have understood if she had said, ‘Don’t you remember?’ And, indeed, sometimes now she would whisper into the dead ear some little wistful wonder or regret.

But Miss Priscilla, after the manner of her kind, took a very common-sense view of ‘this corruptible,’ dwelling on the necessary but painful processes of nature, not only without shrinking, but almost with gusto. So Belle, turning with sickening horror from gruesome details, the mention of which, however, showed no want of feeling, only of perception, crept away to her old childhood’s haunt under the apple-tree, no longer, however, watching for bright possibilities to pass along the towing-path, but sitting listlessly with drooped head and loosely clasped hands.

It was no longer spring, and summer had come, dusty and sultry, with an east wind that parched and blighted and dried up everything.

Mark watched her furtively during those days, longing to comfort her, and wondering, as I have said, if it was her old friend’s death alone that had struck her down like this.

He only realized just then how entirely all the little sunshine in his sombre life was reflected from Belle; how her presence in the house made it endurable; how he unconsciously looked for her, listened for her, thought of her; how pleasant to him was the sound of her young step on the stairs and her fresh voice lilting a tune, and the sight of her face, bright lately with a radiance that was good to see, and the scent

of the flowers with which she filled every nook and corner of the shabby old house.

She had been the source of his most acute self-torment in the first days of his trouble, thinking of all that his father's dishonor had cost the child, and that he could never make up to her; and at times subsequently he had had attacks of passionate compunction over the dull life, and poor education, and want of bright young company and enjoyment that should have been hers.

But of late even he had ceased to torture himself about her, the sunshine of her love and happiness reflecting a grateful warmth even to his poor, chilled, warped nature.

'She will be better when the funeral is over,' he told himself. But she stood dry-eyed at Miss Priscilla's side by the grave, and listened unmoved to the rolling peals of Beethoven's funeral march, which stirred most of the congregation to tears; and he found her afterwards in the old, despondent attitude under the apple-tree.

Mark was appointed to be organist in name and salary, as he had been virtually for some time past, and he was feeling passing rich with the additional thirty pounds a year, and pleased with the feeling that the old organ he loved was his own now, and that he might carry out some alterations in the music without even the appearance of deferring to any one else except the vicar, whose approval was generally taken for granted.

But he would have given it all up gladly to have

restored the brightness to Belle's face and the life to her listless figure, and he relinquished the intention of going back to his organ, and came and sat down by her side.

'Poor little Belle!' he said. 'Poor child! It comes very hard on you.'

And then she told him. I do not know quite how, or how he understood, for it was in confused scraps and fragments; and being all about something so entirely unknown and unsuspected by him, it seemed utterly mysterious, and once or twice he looked at the girl's white face and great shining eyes, and wondered if the shock of the organist's death had not upset her mind, and if she had dreamt or imagined this wild, improbable story of a strange, unknown lover in the spring woods.

But he listened without interruption, except by little, sympathetic interjections; and when her small, hot hand touched his arm, he took it gently in his and held it, soothing and fondling it as he might have done a child's. He got more and more to think it was only a feverish fancy; though, even so, he writhed more than once at the possibility of such a thing happening, and of Belle being so unprotected, with only the blind, feeble old man to take care of her, and was making earnest resolves that such should never happen again, when Sir Gerald Haviland's name caught his ear and roused him to startled attention. He had unconsciously gripped her hand tightly, and she stopped and looked at his face, which was white and fierce.

' Do you mean that it was Sir Gerald Haviland all the time ? '

That was the explanation, then, of this strange story, that had seemed so incredible that he thought it must be the figment of an overwrought brain. This idle, dissipated young spendthrift, of whom he had never heard any good, and of whom rumor told a good deal of indefinite harm, had found out his little ewe lamb, and had been sneaking about under a feigned name and taking advantage of the blindness of her escort. Could anything have been more dastardly and cruel ?

He could hardly restrain the impulse to go straight to this cowardly villain and thrash him to within an inch of his life ; but with a desperate effort he controlled himself, for Belle was hesitating in her outburst of confidence, and was beginning to explain and make excuses, taking up the cudgels in defence before a word of blame had been spoken ; betraying, poor little soul ! what she would never have allowed to herself, that this god of hers had feet of clay ; that it needed all her innocent sophistry to excuse his conduct ; that the love that had looked from his eyes into hers was not the love stronger than death, which many waters could not drown, seeing that it could not even rise above the prospect of straitened circumstances, but was the sort of love that flies out of the window when poverty comes in at the door.

She was quite glad to put into words what she had been struggling ever since they parted to impress on

her own sore little heart — a heart that, with all her arguments, would not be convinced — and to maintain that, of course, it was absolutely impossible for Gerald Haviland to marry any one without a penny, and that, though he wished it ever so much, she would not have consented to ruin all his prospects.

So intent was she on defending her lover from the looks (he could not well trust himself to speak) of Mark's angry, indignant eyes that she did not notice how the expression in them altered, and how the fury seemed to burn itself out into a look of dull pain.

'Belle,' he said at last, 'when you were a baby-child, and I found out that through my father's fault all your money had gone, I hardly knew how to bear it, feeling how helpless I was. But now — now — Why, child, with that fortune you ought to have had you would have been a match for this Gerald Haviland any day — and oh ! little Belle, what can I do? —what can I do? Shall I go to him? Shall I tell him? Oh, surely, surely, if he loves you, it's not just the want of the money that will keep you apart !'

The girl had risen from her seat, and was standing looking down at him.

'Should I really have been quite rich, Mark? As rich as that Mrs. Trevor that he's going to marry?'

'I don't know how rich she may be, but you would have had a large income, big enough to —' He was going to say bitter words about love that could be bought, but she interrupted him.

'Tell me about it, Mark. Do you know I like to think it might have been, that it was not such an utterly impossible thing that Gerald Haviland should have married me.'

So he told her all that he had known or ever been able to find out about the fortune that was to have been hers, wincing at the pain that each word cost him, yet doing it gladly for the sake of the brightening of her face.

'Should I have had a large house, and carriages and horses, and worn jewels, and dressed beautifully, and gone to balls, and —'

'Yes, little Belle ; yes.'

Her eyes were shining ; even a slight flush had stolen into the smooth paleness of her cheek ; and he guessed how she was building up all sorts of bright imaginings of what might have been, all centring round that one figure for whose sake alone she desired those long-lost riches.

She had turned to her old dreaming-place by the garden wall, and her eyes were looking far, far away, beyond the sluggish canal water and the dusty towing-path, towards the hot, coppery sky, from which the sun had disappeared in a lurid haze ; for what might have been is infinitely farther away than what may be.

And Mark sat still under the apple-tree, aching all over with the sense of impotent pain.

She had forgotten his existence till she turned, and then something in his face struck her, and she came and sat down by him and put her hand on his arm.

Their positions seemed reversed, and she was the comforter now.

'Poor Mark! Poor old Mark! it was not your fault.'

'If there was anything I could do!' His voice was hoarse and broken, and she smoothed his shabby coat-sleeve consolingly.

'It's such a comfort to talk to you, Mark. If you'll let me do it sometimes, it will help me so. It is just that feeling that there is no one in the world to talk to about him that makes it so hard. I thought it would have killed me last night. And you will not say anything against him, will you? I know you don't like him, but for my sake you'll try to; and if you ever have any chance of helping him or doing a good turn, you'll do it, won't you?'

'That's not very likely to happen,' Mark said. 'But never fear, little Belle; I'd give my last drop of blood to save an ache in his little finger—for your sake.'

'And you'll tell me everything you hear of him—every word? My heart seems quite dry and gasping just to hear his name. And then, too, if I thought you would n't tell me, I should always be fretting and worrying that there was something the matter—that he was ill or in trouble.'

And this too Mark promised; though this again was very unlikely, for he had been out of the gossip of Duckington for many a day, and did not come in the way of hearing news from the neighborhood.

‘How good you are to me, Mark ; how good !’
And so they sat side by side under the apple-tree,
while the twilight gathered round them, and the mist
rose thick and white over the canal, and up above
the stars came out gentle and kind.

CHAPTER XIV.

LEAVE-TAKING.

His face, as I grant, in spite of spite,
Has a broad-blown comeliness, red and white;
And six feet two, as I think, he stands.

TENNYSON.

IT was almost as unlikely, Mark thought, that he would hear anything about Gerald Haviland as that the day might come when he would have it in his power to help or befriend him, and yet for the next few days the name seemed continually catching his ear, and there was not an evening when he came in that he had not something to tell Belle in answer to her wistful, questioning glance.

It was not as remarkable as it seemed, for, of course, up till now the name of Haviland might have been on everybody's lips and yet passed unheeded by him, while now it attracted his attention directly it was spoken.

But it was curious that he should have met Gerald Haviland himself the following week, and received direct from him the news of his departure for town.

Mark had gone one afternoon, shortly after the funeral, to help Miss Priscilla to look through her brother's papers, a work requiring great patience and

concentration of mind, as Miss Priscilla was wonderfully discursive, and the slightest thing would start her on a career miles away from the subject on hand, and with lightning speed leaping from point to point in a manner that produced giddiness and despair on an ordinarily constructed mind.

The only way of coping with this peculiarity of Miss Priscilla's was to remain perfectly quiet till she got out of breath, and then persistently return to the original point, as if no digression had been made.

Miss Priscilla was going to take up her abode at Mr. Caxton's, where of late she had spent good part of her time, and where, being great friends with the housekeeper, she could share that lady's labors and occupy two rooms adjoining the laundry, into which she could move all her household gods, wax-flowers, crochet mats, and framed samplers, and to which she could retire when ructions ensued, as they will in the best-regulated families.

'And I hope, Mr. Mark, you and Belle will often come to see me there. I shall have my own apartments, and Mr. Caxton has been most kind in all his arrangements that there should be nothing menial in the position. I am sure Mr. Caxton would have no objection to your coming to the front-door, though I myself prefer the back entrance as being more convenient.'

In the course of the afternoon Mark had heard a good deal about the front and back doors at Mr. Caxton's, and he had grown a little sleepy, the room being hot with the afternoon sun and stuffy with Miss

Priscilla's new crape ; so he was rather glad when she said she had promised to step round to Mr. Caxton's, if he would excuse her for ten minutes ; and he threw open the window as high as it would go, and set the front-door open, establishing such a thorough draught through the house as would have given Miss Priscilla a cold in the head even to think about.

He guessed that Miss Priscilla's ten minutes would mean an hour, and he reckoned to finish the papers and sort out the music, which was all to come as a legacy to himself, before she came back.

But at the end of quarter of an hour a step sounded outside, and he was just closing the window when a knock at the door told it was not the mistress of the house.

A tall man was standing on the threshold, and Mark guessed at once who it was, and grudgingly allowed to himself how good-looking and well built, he was, how well dressed and generally pleasant-looking and attractive, making him feel at once his own shabbiness and dustiness, his greasy, threadbare coat, his ink-stained fingers, and his stooping shoulders.

‘ Is Miss Spence at home ? ’

‘ No ; she has just gone out.’

Mark was conscious that Gerald Haviland’s eyes were searching beyond him, looking for some one else in the room behind, and he involuntarily drew himself up to his full height and squared his shoulders, though there was no one to hide, and a

fierce anger flushed up into his face, and a feeling was choking in his throat as if he would like to fly at this man, like a sheep-dog might at a wolf prowling round the fold. And then Belle's words, 'for my sake,' came back to his memory, and he pulled himself together with an effort.

'Can I give her any message?'

The draught was fluttering the papers in the sitting-room and blowing the window curtains, and the door stirred a little, giving an effect of living movement within, to which Gerald Haviland was plainly listening; and when he spoke, it was more to the imaginary listener in the room behind than to the grim-looking man who stood so squarely in the entrance, holding the door with one hand, with evidently not the slightest intention of inviting him to come in.

'Will you tell her how greatly concerned Lady Haviland was to hear of her loss, and I too? We did not hear of it till last night. I had no idea he was in failing health. He did not appear —'

'You have seen him quite lately?'

'Yes — that is, Lady Haviland saw him the very day he died, and was struck by his cheerfulness and vigor.'

'Indeed. Did *you* think so?'

'Will you tell her,' Sir Gerald went on, and his voice was seeking that listening ear that was not there — 'will you give her our sincere sympathy, and say I hoped to have offered it to her in person, but am leaving for London early to-morrow? But

my mother will come in a few days to see her. Is she — is she alone ?'

' I beg your pardon ? '

' Has she any one with her ? '

He was thinking of the girlish figure on which the blind man leant, and again of Belle as he had seen her last, only a week ago, standing with the great confident love and happiness faded out of her little white face, and the stricken look of her bent head and nerveless hands dropped at her side.

Mark too was thinking of Belle, as she had looked the evening of the funeral, standing leaning on the garden wall, looking through the gathering mist at what might have been. Lonely enough in both instances !

' I believe it is arranged for Miss Priscilla to go to Mr. Caxton's.'

I doubt if Gerald Haviland even heard the last piece of information about the old lady of whose welfare he was inquiring so anxiously, with such a thrill in his voice, for just then the wind blew the sitting-room door wide open and revealed its emptiness.

There was a perceptible change in the tone of his voice as he resumed.:

' I will write a line on my card to Miss Priscilla, if you will kindly give it her.'

' Certainly.'

And a minute later Sir Gerald had gone, and Mark was holding a card with some pencilled words on it in his hand ; and the next he had dropped it, and the wind had fluttered it away under the grate.

'The best place for it,' Mark said as he went back to his sorting.

But before Miss Priscilla came in it had been rescued from its dusty corner, and restored in a somewhat smeary condition to its place on the table.

'Very gratifying indeed!' Miss Priscilla declared when she came in, and the words which Mark's pride had not allowed him to decipher were read out, with many little comments: "Sorry not to have seen you." And I am sure so am I, especially as I have not seen Sir Gerald since he came home. "Deeply grieved at your loss." Dear me! what feeling hearts the Havilands have! How touched poor dear James would have been! "Am leaving to-morrow for London." How considerate and kind to come when he must have been so busy with his preparations for departure! "Lady H. will call in a few days."

Miss Priscilla's spectacles grew a little dim and her voice tremulous over this last sentence. There was a subtle compliment in the initial that went to her heart. It implied a familiarity and friendliness which would have been wanting in the full name, and it was in no way to be accounted for by the small space on the card.

But how very tiresome it was that she should have mislaid that card! In the bustle of Mark's leaving she must have laid it down somewhere, and could not find it again, though she searched high and low for it. She would have liked to show it to Mrs. Dyson, the housekeeper, and to have stuck it negligently into the

frame of her little looking-glass in her parlor; or to have kept it in her photograph book. But there ! it was gone, and it could not be helped ; and there was a little disbelieving look in Mrs. Dyson's face when the pencilled words, with, I am afraid, a few alterations and additions as time went on, had been repeated several times ; though, as Miss Priscilla said, Mr. Mark could bear witness to the truth of what she said.

Mark certainly could have borne very substantial witness for an hour at least after Miss Priscilla had lost it, for he could have produced the card itself which he carried away in his pocket with a dishonesty you would hardly have believed him capable of.

But he knew that it was not intended for Miss Priscilla, and though, when he said he would certainly give it her, he meant to follow out his instructions to the letter by conveying it to the old lady, he felt he was carrying it out in the spirit when he placed it in Belle's hand, and turned away quickly that he might not see the lighting up of her face ; and he only guessed how it was read and re-read, and pressed to her lips and to her heart, and treasured and cherished like the rosebud that this same Jerry had tossed to the child years ago.

CHAPTER XV.

PATIENCE.

**Patience and sorrow strove
Who should express her goodliest.**

SHAKESPEARE.

EVERY one knows the old fable of the boy who cried ‘Wolf!’ so often in fun that when he cried it in desperate earnest one day no one came to his help, and many of us have some instances in real life of apprehension worked on unnecessarily that when there is a real call for it, is not forthcoming.

Mrs. Hastings’ health was a case in point, and Mark could hardly bring himself to believe Dr. Mainwaring when, one day, he hailed him in the street and, passing a stout, fatherly hand under the young man’s arm, told him that his mother was in a very critical state; and I am afraid his first tendency was to think that the old doctor had been taken in by his mother’s gloomy description of her symptoms, and that he, Mark, knew better.

‘I don’t mean to say she’s going to die to-day or to-morrow. But what I want you to understand is that it’s not all humbug now, and that it would not take much to finish her off. You don’t mind my speaking plainly, and, of course, I have n’t said any-

thing to her. It's just the people who are always thinking they are going to die who are frightened to death if any one else thinks so.'

As Mark sat opposite his mother that evening, he was bound to confess that the fretful face was waxy and drawn, and the eyes hollow, and the querulous voice more feeble, and the nagging interrupted by shortness of breath.

Illness and suffering often bring patience and heroic endurance even in natures where you would least expect it, and whether such patience is heaven-sent grace or a virtue cultivated with bitter struggle (and, after all, they are practically the same), it is a thing to be devoutly thankful for, restless irritability and fretful impatience so greatly increasing the suffering for all concerned.

Dr. Mainwaring was the special object of irritation that evening, though coupled with every one else in the house in turn in a manner that was quite ingenuous. Even Alice, the depressed little servant, was scathed every time she ventured her long-suffering, red nose inside the door, by cutting remarks on the length of time she kept Dr. Mainwaring waiting after he rang the bell, and the dirt of her apron when at last she admitted him.

Mark's connection with the matter was his allowing his mother to be attended by an ignorant country practitioner, when a London specialist might save her life; but she had long known her life was of no importance to anybody, and perhaps when her constitution was ruined by mistaken treatment and

inferior drugs, the better some people would be pleased.

As for Belle, Mark could see directly he came in that the girl was driven almost to her last point of endurance, by the little patch of bright color on each cheek, and by the quivering of the under lip, kept in check now and then by the small, white teeth.

As for Belle, Mrs. Hastings was not surprised at any display of selfishness and want of manners ; but when even that old boor of a doctor was trying to amuse her with a little news from the outer world — not the world of Duckington, in which Mark and Belle were so entirely absorbed, but the county society, to which Mrs. Hastings had been accustomed before her troubles came to drag her down — when Dr. Mainwaring was telling her about the Havilands of Poundley, and of Sir Gerald's approaching marriage, Belle kept interrupting and fidgeting, and opening and shutting the door, and crackling the newspaper, till there was no hearing the doctor, ‘ who at the best of times speaks as if he had a potato in his mouth ; and he need n’t be so cross if one does not hear what he says, for he’s as deaf as a post himself.’

With all Mark’s fencing to turn the subject, nothing could prevent Mrs. Hastings from retailing what Dr. Mainwaring had told her about the Havilands, and how Sir Gerald was going to marry a rich widow with six children.

‘ I think he said six, did n’t he, Belle ? ’

‘ I don’t think he said so,’ Belle humbly protested.

'Ah! I don't suppose you heard anything he said, making all that noise with the paper. Do you know, Mark, I'd half a mind to ask Dr. Mainwaring to look at Belle's ears, as she's so terribly deaf. I've always to speak twice, and very often more, before she hears what I say. But as I was saying when you interrupted me, he is going to marry a widow with six children, a very rich, vulgar *parvenue*, old enough to be his mother. I don't know why you should shake your head, Belle, for I suppose I'm as likely to know as you are, as Dr. Mainwaring was talking to me, and you were not paying any attention; and besides, in old days I knew the Havilands quite intimately, and Lady Haviland often —'

'Oh mother!'

'Well, Mark, of course you know better than I do, and can remember what happened before you were born; for I am speaking of the time when I was first married and Lady Haviland was a bride too, and people used to compare us, and it was quite a question which was the prettier. Oh, I don't expect you to believe it, but it was the fact all the same, and there's no vanity in my saying so now; and I don't suppose Lady Haviland is much to look at either by this time, though she has not had to go through all the troubles that have fallen to my lot.'

It was autumn by that time. The year had dragged along its weary length through the glare of July and the dull, heavy days of August and a wet September. And now it was October, without any of its sometimes rich and varied loveliness. Every-

thing was dark and sodden and misty, making one long for a brisk frost to fetch the forlorn leaves off the trees, and dry the sticky mud in the roads, and check the growth of evil-looking fungi that made their sudden appearance in damp corners. But after that uncomfortable tea Belle had slipped away to her old refuge under the apple-tree, and there Mark found her after making an ineffectual attempt to make his mother comfortable.

'Wasting the coal by poking it all to pieces ! Just like a man. I never knew one who could make a fire. Putting my chair just into the draught, when he might know I like it the other side ! And do, for goodness' sake ! put that shawl down. I don't want to be bundled up in that style. And my book just where I can't reach it ! And my spectacles lost, of course ! They always are when people will meddle with my things ! Got them on, have I ? Well, it puts any one into a nervous flurry having you fussing so !'

Mark's efforts were not successful, certainly, and he went out rather crestfallen to find Belle.

They had heard nothing more of Gerald Haviland's marriage till to-day, and I think they had both begun to think there was nothing in it ; and perhaps Belle's dreams were insensibly drifting back from what might have been to what might be, and between the few lines written on that card she had read all manner of words of hope and possibilities of happiness.

Mark had brought her from time to time such

stray little bits of news of Poundley and its inhabitants as he happened to come across, and nowadays his ears were very open to such gossip, and he even went some distance out of his way to glean it. He had heard, as we have said, from Gerald Haviland's own lips that he was leaving for London ; and he had met him again on the following day on his way to the station, and he was relieved to see him alone, so that he had not to tell Belle that he was escorting Mrs. Trevor, who, he concluded, was still at Poundley ; but he heard indirectly, later, that Mrs. Trevor had gone back to London the week before, and it was not likely that she should cut too large a slice out of the middle of the season.

Lady Haviland was still at Poundley, and her pony-carriage was often to be seen in Duckington. She came, as she had promised, to see Miss Priscilla, and every word she said was retailed to Belle's willing ear.

'And she asked all about you, Belle, and where you lived ; and she said you were' ('sweetly pretty' were the words actually used, but, from fear of exciting vanity, Miss Priscilla softened it down to) 'very passable.'

Words which Belle repeated softly to herself many a time, scanning the reflection of her face wistfully in the looking-glass.

'I wish she had thought me pretty,' she used to say. 'It would have been nice if Jerry's mother had thought me pretty. But, of course, she has seen so many pretty, well-dressed girls, it would n't be likely.'

And yet, so unmistakable had been the kindly admiration in Lady Haviland's eyes when she looked at the girl that Belle felt a little pang of disappointment that 'very passable' was all she had found to say of her to Miss Priscilla.

'Sir Gerald is having a gay time in London,' Miss Priscilla said; and Mark began to study the society papers, and run his eye down lists of people present at balls and entertainments, and found the name he was looking for now and then, and once the name of Mrs. Trevor in the same list as Sir Gerald's.

'It does not by any means follow,' he told Belle at one of their evening sittings under the apple-tree, which became now of daily, or rather nightly, occurrence; and he said it apparently *apropos* of nothing, after a long silence—'It does not follow by any means that because two people are in London they are constantly meeting. It is not like it would be down here. London is such a large place that even people much in the same rank of society may go out night after night and yet never come across one another.'

But Belle did not get much comfort out of these remarks, for Mark knew nearly as little of London as she did; and such vastness seemed incredible as would keep apart two who wished to meet; and perhaps she was right.

But certainly there was a distinct improvement in Belle's spirits when, early in July, it was recorded that Mrs. Trevor had left London for the Norwegian fiords, and no announcement had yet appeared of a

marriage arranged and shortly to take place coupling her name and Sir Gerald's.

'What did it mean?' they wondered.

'Perhaps he has changed his mind,' thought Belle, with a light in her soft eyes.

'Perhaps she has changed her mind,' thought Mark; for there were several names mentioned among the guests on Lord Causton's yacht who might mean possible suitors for the hand and fortune of the fair widow, which were not likely to go begging while Gerald Haviland hesitated.

And then, after a few days at Poundley, during which neither Mark nor Belle saw him, he went off to Scotland; and if he came back to Poundley later on, they knew nothing of it, and news of him had been very few and far between, till this visit of Dr. Mainwaring's brought it all to the fore again, and roughly put to flight all the little tender maybe's and fluttering young hopes that were beginning to assert themselves, and revealed the grim what-is-to-be in plain, unvarnished fact.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MESSAGE.

The lyfe so short, the craft so long to lerne,
Th' assay so hard, so sharpe the conquering.

CHAUCER.

D R. MAINWARING'S great piece of news was quite true in its main feature, though, of course, in its details of six children, vulgarity, and age it was not absolutely correct. But Gerald Haviland's marriage was a settled thing, and was to come off immediately after Christmas. Workmen were up at the Court altering and embellishing it, not altogether, report said, to Lady Haviland's satisfaction; but surely the one who pays has the right to the first choice as to the style in which the money is laid out. Electricity was being introduced through the old wainscotting and solid Elizabethan walls; horses were being chosen, carriages built, conservatories planned. There was nothing else talked about, you may be sure, in the neighborhood, and in Duckington you could hardly go a dozen paces up High Street without hearing something about it; and if you saw a group of people gathered at a corner talking eagerly, you need not cross the road to gather what the subject of discussion was.

Mark was not sorry that Belle did not go out much during those days, though pacing the damp garden-path from end to end did not seem sufficient exercise or change from the monotonous life of attendance on an invalid whom it was impossible to please or satisfy. But there was no disguising the fact that Mrs. Hastings was failing very fast, and now it was really the case, she fought against it as vehemently as she had tried hitherto to impress it on other people.

She resented any little attentions ; she jealously clung to her small housekeeping duties, and asserted herself as mistress of the house ; though it was Belle's thankless task to come behind and supplement failures of strength or memory, with the certainty of being rated for interference and meddling if Mrs. Hastings found out what she was doing.

Perhaps it was not a bad thing for the girl, having this counter-irritant to keep her thoughts from continually dwelling on the one theme ; and Mark quite marvelled at the patience — which seemed to him almost superhuman — with which she endured the continual blister of his mother's irritability.

'Don't pity me so, dear, old Mark,' she used to say when he followed her about with such anxious, pitiful eyes. 'I know she can't help saying such sharp things, and they don't really hurt. And sometimes I think she is sorry, though you can't expect her to say so ; and she must like my doing things for her, as she is so vexed if I don't do them. She would not eat any breakfast this morning because

I had not cut the bread and butter, though I never do it quite as she likes.'

It was in this negative way that Belle gathered the grudging love and gratitude of the fretful invalid ; and perhaps the fact that, as greater weakness crept on and more assistance became necessary, Mrs. Hastings would allow no one but Belle to touch her — though she complained unceasingly of her clumsiness and roughness — was more gratifying to the girl than might have been profuse expressions of gratitude and affection from the lips of a more amiable invalid ; and she was quite touched by Mrs. Hastings' querulous complaints when the very inadequate exercise up and down the garden-path had been more than usually prolonged.

'I won't be away so long again, aunty,' she said, and was, of course, at once snubbed.

'Oh, I don't mind how long you are. It was not on *my* account I complained. I am only too glad of a little quiet.'

'Haviland has come home,' Mark said one evening. 'I met him twice this afternoon. He was outside the church when I went in to the practice, and I met him again as I came out.'

'Was he alone ?'

'Yes ; he seemed to be waiting for somebody.'

It was only a few minutes Belle and Mark had in those days for what had become a daily meeting in the garden under the old apple-tree. Mrs. Hastings could not bear to be left for any length of time.

It was within a fortnight of Christmas, and there was a sharp touch of frost in the air, and the stars had that keen, metallic twinkle they never have in summer.

The room had been close and stuffy, with a dull fire, from which Mrs. Hastings' constant poking had extracted all the briskness; so it was pleasant to Belle's aching head to come out into the fresh, keen, frosty air, though Mark's fidgets insisted on a shawl to wrap round her.

'I think,' Mark went on, 'that he was hoping to see you; for I met Miss Priscilla afterwards, and she said she had been having quite a long talk with Sir Gerald, and he had been asking about you — at least I think it must have been you, though Miss Priscilla was set on making it out to be one of the Mainwarings; but they never went out with the old man, did they?'

Mark had gathered both of Belle's little hands into his to keep them warm, and he felt them tremble as he spoke.

'Would you like to see him, little Belle?'

'Not to speak to, Mark; but I should like to see him just once more, to make sure that I've not forgotten what he is like. Sometimes, when I can't sleep at night, I don't seem able to recollect his face one bit; and once, I was half asleep and dreamt he was coming along the towing-path just as he used to, and when he looked up it was not his face at all, but yours. Wasn't it funny, Mark?'

'Very funny,' Mark agreed; and it was too dark

for her to see the bitter, little smile on the face that was graver and older than its years, and in no way attractive, and so different altogether from the gay, debonair, prosperous charm of Jerry.

' If I had a photograph of him that I could look at sometimes ! It's not wrong, is it, Mark ? It's a photograph of Jerry I want, not Sir Gerald Haviland who is going to marry Mrs. Trevor. I get more and more to feel that they are quite different people, and that Jerry has gone away or died, and one can just remember him as much as one likes without doing any harm. Yes, Alice, I'm coming ; ' for the forlorn, little maid was making signals of distress from the door.

Mark took a few more turns up and down the hard garden-path, before he followed her in. He had got over that first consuming hunger and thirst after tobacco which used to assail him when he first gave it up, and there was a certain slow pacing with his hands in his pockets, which he called having his pipe, when he was ruminating on any subject.

Now, as he finally turned by the wall at the bottom of the garden, his foot struck against something on the path, and he picked it up and carried it indoors, concluding that it was some possession of Belle's which she had dropped.

But when he looked at it by the light of the smoking paraffin lamp in the hall, he found it was a gentleman's leather card-case, with initials in silver on it. How could it have come there ? Was Belle deceiving him and meeting this man ? Had he come to

the very house and Belle told him never a word of the visit?

It fell open in his hand, and on a piece of paper inside he saw some pencilled words, and then he remembered where he had picked it up, and guessed that it had been tossed into the garden from the towing-path.

The words that caught his eye were: ‘I must see you. I will come to the towing-path to-morrow at five.’

Mark’s teeth clenched in anger and indignation at the cruel malice of fate, that made him the medium between the man he hated and distrusted and the girl he — and Belle. And his promise to Belle bound him to take this cowardly, cruel message to her, and forbade his tearing it up.

Inside the parlor door his mother’s fretful voice went on in one uninterrupted stream of nagging at Belle. What a dreary, miserable life for the girl! Who could blame her if she escaped from it at any risk? — if the gay, handsome young lover called her to come away to sunshine and happiness and love, what would prevent her leaving the dull, uninteresting, gray monotony and the constant provocation?

And then came the quick suggestion to suppress the note. Was it right to put the child in the way of temptation? She herself had said only a few minutes ago that she was getting to think of Jerry as dead or far away. So why revive the acute feeling that perhaps might die away into, at any rate, resignation? It was only to put the thing into his pocket, and to take

care that Belle was fully occupied or out at the hour named, and this flourishing young hero would just cool his heels along the towing-path, and feel the snubbing he so well deserved, and never know that Belle had no hand in it.

And then he went straight in and put the card-case and the note into Belle's hand, and took up the tangled skein of his mother's grievances to divert her attention from the girl.

'I can trust her,' he kept saying to himself. 'I can trust her even in the fire. And, right or wrong, I have kept my word to her.'

'Shall you be late home to-night, Mark?'

Belle had followed him out into the hall next morning as he was starting for the office. He could see she had not slept, from the great dark rings under her eyes, which looked as if they ached with wakefulness.

'The usual time, I suppose, Belle. I don't know of anything to keep me later. I might' — in answer to a wistfulness in those sleepless eyes — 'come home a little earlier.'

'Might you?'

'Of course I might. I'll ask Mr. Huxley. I have n't had an hour off for ever so long, and there's not much doing just now.'

'I thought' — hesitatingly — 'if you would be in by — five ;' 'five' following in so low a voice that he had to guess what time she wanted him to come.

'Of course I will, Belle.'

And he went off with quite a warm, little glow at

his heart, which was apparent even in his face ; for Bessie Mainwaring, from her now-as-ever constant watch-tower, the dining-room window, exclaimed :

‘ Why, Mark Hastings looks quite young and cheerful again ! He used to be such a nice fellow. I wonder if he would come to our dance ? ’

Vacation-time was approaching, when oaves were not plentiful.

‘ An hour or two off this afternoon ? Of course, my dear fellow, by all means. I want you to run over to Bristol for me this morning to see Messrs. Cutts about those papers ; but it ’s nothing that will take long, and you can get back by an early afternoon train, or earlier if you like.’

All seemed going smoothly, and this visit to Bristol was a convenience, as he could get the Christmas present for Belle over which he was ruminating when he was ‘ taking his pipe ’ in the garden last night.

There was a photographer’s window there in which he had seen, among many others, a photograph of Gerald Haviland taken some years ago, a handsome boyish face smiling out on the care and bustle of the busy street, as if there were no such thing as trouble or anxiety. It had been a good advertisement to the photographer, but was a little old-fashioned now, in these days of improved photographic methods and appliances, and Mark had but little doubt that he could obtain it for a trifle, which proved to be the case.

Everything seemed going smoothly so far, and that warm feeling at his heart which Belle's reliance on him had kindled carried him through the discomforts of a raw, foggy day and muddy streets.

But then came delays. Mr. Cutts was out. Would he call again in half-an-hour? Then Mr. Cutts was engaged. Would he take a seat? And Mark saw the hands of the office clock creeping on to the hour of the train he had hoped to catch, while he tried to possess his soul in patience. Well, the next train got into Duckington before five; it was no use fretting himself.

And then, as ill-luck would have it, there was some small accident on the line; some empty trucks had got off the rails, and the Duckington train was delayed for two hours, so that it was seven o'clock before he reached home.

The front-door was open, and Alice standing outside on the pavement with her scanty petticoats fluttering in the chill, sleety blast that swept along High Street, while she clutched wildly at her cap to keep it from whirling away into space.

'I'm main glad you've come,' she panted, with the wind blowing the words back down her throat as she uttered them, in the agitation of the moment forgetting all the awe of the master which ordinarily turned her into idiotic, open-mouthed silence in his presence. 'Missus is in such a taking, and I don't know what's come of Miss Belle. She've been gone this two hours. Missus was nasty to her, and she come into the kitchen just as I was putting on the

kettle for tea, and she says, "When Mr. Mark comes in," she says; and then she says, "Oh, never mind ; it don't matter !" and went upstairs to fetch her hat ; and I think I heard her come down and go out, but I ain't positive.'

CHAPTER XVII.

A CONFLICT.

And is *this* like love, to stand
With no help in my hand,
When, strong as death, I fain would watch above thee ?

MRS. BROWNING.

I THINK it was as well that Gerald Haviland did not meet Mark Hastings as he went into the house, though it was on himself that Mark's desperate blame fell. He felt that he had been the means by which this cruel temptation had been put in Belle's way. He might have shielded and protected her ; he ought to have done so. He had miserably betrayed his trust, worse a hundred times than his father had done ; and if, as seemed plain, irretrievable harm and wrong had come of his culpable folly, on his head ought the punishment to fall, and not on hers, merciful Heaven, not on hers !

And all the time he had to quiet and appease his mother, and to laugh off her querulous apprehensions.

'I always said some harm would come of her wandering about the roads at all hours, and the number of tramps about, and all the horrid things one reads in the papers. And that reminds me, Mark ; the paper was late again to-day. I wish you would speak to Jenkinson.'

'All right, mother. Here, Alice, bring in tea. Miss Belle will be in directly. I'll just wash my hands and come and pour it out.'

And then he got just a minute to think, and involuntarily he turned to the garden. A fine sleet was falling, and the path was marked out already in white, so that by the dim light that followed him out from the hall-lamp he could see its course dimly to the other end of the garden.

No one there, of course ; he knew there would be no one there, and the lightly falling snow would have obliterated any footsteps ; but if she had left any message for him, it might have been put on their old rendezvous, the garden-seat, and he made his way down there, with the snow falling on his bare head, unfelt from the deadly chill at his heart.

Nothing there, though he lighted a match and examined the rickety seat and twisted branches. A walking-stick he had left there last night was still lying across the path, as if no hasty footsteps had disturbed it.

'Mr. Mark ! Mr. Mark !' It was Alice's voice, in a breathless whisper. 'I've just stepped up to Miss Belle's room, and the door's locked.'

'All right, all right, Alice. Take in the tea, and don't say anything to your mistress. It's all right.'

But as he came wearily back to the house, with all the miserable catastrophe so plain and evident to his mind, he heard a sound that made him stop suddenly and listen as if all his senses were concentrated on

that of hearing. Some one was calling his name softly from above.

‘Mark, is that you?’

‘Belle!’ He could do nothing in that first moment of exquisite relief except repeat her name, and he hardly took in what she was saying at first.

‘It is down in that corner by the root of the Virginian creeper. I am sure it fell there.’

‘What fell?’

‘The key. Mark, dear Mark, find it quick, and come and let me out. I am sure aunty is waiting for tea, and is vexed at my not coming.’

And Mark, sorely puzzled, found a key at the place indicated, and, taking it up, unlocked Belle’s bedroom door.

‘I thought you would never come, Mark, and I got to feel as if I must go down to the garden wall, as if I could n’t help it. And once I started to go, and then I turned back, and went upstairs and locked myself in, and thought I would n’t go. And I buried my head in the bed-clothes and put my fingers in my ears, and yet through it all I could hear his footstep, and I am sure I could smell the scent of his cigar. And I felt it was no good. I must go or I should die. But when I put my hand to turn the key, it came out of the lock; and then I had a sudden sort of impulse, and I threw it out of the window. I felt very bad just at first, as if I could throw myself out after it; but I’m better now. And oh, Mark, I’m glad, quite glad, I did n’t go!’

She was trembling as one who had been through a

mighty struggle, and she held to Mark's arm as one under whose feet the solid earth has shaken and failed might cling to a firm support ; and he stroked her hand with a heart too full of relief and gratitude to say anything.

There was a brightness about her that evening that there had not been for a long time, and which Mark feared was half hysterical ; but he found himself laughing with her — ‘like silly children,’ Mrs. Hastings called it — at some trifling mistake of Alice’s, and he became conscious how wonderfully sunny life could be with Belle’s eyes smiling across at him with that clear shining after rain that is so peculiarly radiant.

Mrs. Hastings did her utmost to prevent that sunshine from becoming excessive, like an east wind blemishing the good deeds of the spring. But ‘a merrie heart goes all the way,’ even the wearisome way of nagging, which so soon tires the sad heart ; and though perhaps neither Belle’s nor Mark’s heart could rightly be described as ‘merrie,’ hers being shaken and sore with little pangs of regret now and then, and his full of gladness that was almost pain, the evening was far more endurable than many of its predecessors had been.

They were glad afterwards that they had been so patient, that they had humored her whims and let her contradictions pass unnoticed ; though their very acquiescence became another source of exasperation. In the night a stroke of paralysis came, and laid its silencing hand on the scolding tongue, and dulled the

fretful, worrying brain, and left the poor body helpless and crippled.

'She will not last many days,' Dr. Mainwaring said, with that positiveness which most doctors assume and the laity accept, though each ought to know how impossible it is to speak with certainty on the issues of life and death.

And those outside the house to whom he said it shook their heads and sighed, and said, 'Well, poor old lady, it's hardly to be wished. She has been a burden to herself and every one else for years, and now she's so helpless it will be just a happy release.'

But if either of them had ventured to speak thus to Belle, they would not have done it twice; for if Mrs. Hastings had been the sweetest and most loving mother, Belle could not have nursed her with more devoted and tender care, seeking with unwearied patience to make out the inarticulate efforts at expression, and to understand and satisfy the wants that the poor invalid hardly knew herself, and to discover any means of alleviating and soothing the restlessness and weariness; and she was furious at any neglect or inattention, and quick to resent anything said in disparagement.

Indeed, I think she forgot all Mrs. Hastings' former shortcomings that first moment when she came into her room and took the poor, numbed, stiff left hand in hers, and met the strange, appealing look in the eyes, and heard the indistinct babble of the tongue that had been sometimes so sharp to wound.

And if Mrs. Hastings' trust and reliance in the girl

could only have been inferred indirectly before, it was very evident now. She could hardly bear Belle out of her sight, and the low, restless moan was incessant except when Belle was there, rubbing her hand and petting and coaxing her. She would not take her food from any other hand, or go to sleep unless Belle read to her or sang little simple hymn-tunes.

Mark used to protest sometimes at Belle being so entirely absorbed, with hardly time allowed for a breath of fresh air or to sit down to her own meals, and he thought the girl's health would give way under such a prolonged strain ; for, as is often the case, the doctor was wrong, and the crippled life dragged on not only for days, but for weeks and months.

But Belle did not seem to flag ; and, indeed, perhaps the constant occupation, absorbing all her time and energies, was the best salve for the very sore heart, and the feeble, dependent invalid, whose eyes followed her every movement, helped to fill the vacant place left by Jerry.

That time brought Mark and Belle very near together. In the evening, when Mrs. Hastings had been read or sung to sleep, Belle would creep out of her room, leaving the door a little open ; and she would find Mark sitting on the stairs in the dark, and she would come and sit down beside him, and they would talk in low voices, with pauses to listen to the sleeper's breathing, or sometimes would sit there in silence, just shoulder to shoulder, in that silent sympathy which is so wonderfully consoling.

One evening Mark came in with a piece of news

which had come to his ears in the day, and which had distracted his mind sadly from business, wondering how it would affect Belle, and whether it could be reckoned good news or not that Gerald Haviland's wedding had been postponed till the spring.

Surely, if it were to be done at all, then 't were well it were done quickly for all concerned. A reprieve is worth little but for the hope that it may lead to a commutation of the sentence; and Mark shrank from stirring up again the uncertainty, and the turbulent hopes and fears that seemed to have calmed down into resignation, if not content.

She was so occupied with some slight improvement that had taken place that day in the invalid's condition that he had no opportunity at first of telling his news, and when he did so she sat quite silent for a moment.

‘Why is it put off?’

‘Mrs. Trevor has not been well. The doctors have ordered her to the south of France. It is nothing of any importance, I heard Mr. Huxley say, and would not have postponed the wedding if there had not been also some delay about the settlements.’

It was quite dark on the staircase, with only a little glimmer of firelight coming from the door of Mrs. Hastings' room, so he could not see Belle's face, and she sat quite silent for some minutes.

Was she weaving anew bright fabrics of possibilities, with the gay thread of hope running through? Was she building fair castles in the air, to overwhelm her once more when they crumbled into ruins? Those

airy castles are heavy weights when they fall upon their builder's heart.

Mark's heart grew very heavy while that silence lasted, till a small, cold hand crept into his, and Belle said, with a little sigh: 'I think I am sorry it is put off, Mark; it was to have been to-morrow. And, Mark,' she went on, with a little determined effort in her voice, 'I think I won't hear any more about Sir Gerald. I made you promise to tell me all you heard, but now I would rather not, unless you hear he is ill or in trouble.'

And Mark took the little hand and warmed it gently in his, and said: 'Yes, little Belle, it shall be as you wish.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

DR. MAINWARING'S PLAN.

So may he rest ; his faults lie gently on him.

SHAKESPEARE.

IT was not till the spring that Mrs. Hastings died, and the Mainwarings and other kind-hearted but unsympathetic people could hardly believe in or, if believed in, have patience with the grief of Belle, when her long winter of nursing turned into the quiet spring-time of death.

The girl was quite prostrated, no doubt partly from the long strain of nursing suddenly relaxed. She held out bravely till the end ; held the poor head on her shoulder, singing low, crooning, little hymns, whispering fond, comforting words, fondling the chill hands against her warm young breast, looking love into dim, dying eyes that knew her long after other faces were unrecognizable in the mists of the dark valley, going as far as one mortal can with another down the steep, stony bank of Jordan.

But when the last difficult breath was drawn, and no other came to trouble the calm of the long sleep, though the hearts of the listeners stopped as they waited breathlessly for it ; and when Dr. Mainwaring, who had fallen asleep by the bedside, too kind to go

away, and yet too accustomed to such scenes to keep awake, woke up with a start at the sudden silence which follows death's 'Peace, be still,' then Belle fell back quite unconscious, and Mark carried her away into her room, not sure that the slight young form that lay so powerless and inert in his arms might not be dead too ; and he delivered her over, half unwillingly, to Miss Priscilla's care, so sweet to him was the feeling of her head on his shoulder and the soft hair against his cheek.

And for the next few days Miss Priscilla mounted guard over Belle, while she went on sleeping, only rousing now and then to take nourishment, and half realize what had happened, and then falling off again into that exhausted sleep mercifully sent by nature to make up long arrears of sleepless and disturbed nights.

'It's all right,' Dr. Mainwaring assured Mark. 'It's the best thing she could do ; there's no need to be anxious.'

A remark so often made and so absolutely useless, seeing that anxiety is so rarely in proportion to the need for it.

So Mark followed his mother alone to her grave, though Dr. Mainwaring hurried in towards the end of the service, pulling on the withered black kid gloves that had done duty on so many similar occasions.

There were a good many marks of respect shown in the place, taking the form of closed shutters and flowers.

'I hope Mark noticed that all our blinds were

down,' Bessie Mainwaring said, with tears in her kind eyes.

But I am afraid it was all lost on Mark, who would hardly have observed if the town had been upside down, so full were his thoughts of that anxiety which Dr. Mainwaring had said was quite unnecessary.

It seemed a pity that Mrs. Hastings herself could not have known that the shutters were up at all the best tradespeople's, even at Mr. Turton the butcher's with whom Mrs. Hastings had had so many passages at arms in matters of underweight and overcharge. And here comes in the difficult question which we cannot discuss here — how far funeral observances are tributes to the dead or attentions to the mourners.

'I hear you sent some beautiful flowers for poor Mrs. Hastings,' Bessie Mainwaring said to Mr. Caxton, who looked rather embarrassed, for he had sent a fragrant basket of violets and white roses to Belle for herself, without any intention of swelling the number of floral tributes a list of which the undertaker sent to the Duckington journal.

'Have you seen the little girl?'

'Belle? No. Miss Priscilla said she was not well enough to see any one, though father says there is not much the matter with her. But she's not a little girl now, Mr. Caxton, though every one talks as if she were. She must be quite twenty, and we've been wondering what she will do, for, of course, she and Mark Hastings can't go on living together; it would n't be proper.'

A good many other people in the town had been wondering the same, though the difficulty had never occurred to the two mainly concerned.

'They seem just like brother and sister,' Mr. Caxton said.

'Yes; but they're not. No relation at all, I believe; and people are so ill-natured, and some people think Belle quite a pretty girl; and Mark is only a young man still, though he does behave as if he were an old grandfather.'

'Would n't it do if Miss Priscilla lived with them?' suggested Mr. Caxton.

Upon which Bessie quoted that Mrs. Grundy whose existence in Duckington Belle had denied when Jerry had alluded to her.

Belle came down for an hour on the evening of the funeral, looking so slim and willowy in her black dress, and so white and large-eyed; and she and Mark sat near together, and talked in low tones of the old mother, remembering all the rare kindnesses and small ways and likings, tenderly fingering the work-things in the old basket, with the needle rusted in the hem where she had left it the evening when her hand lost any cunning it had ever possessed for needlework.

They took no thought for the morrow just then; earth's days seem so short and unimportant when any one we love has passed on into the great tomorrow, and Miss Priscilla came to take her off to bed before they had come down to their own insignificant affairs.

But almost as soon as she was gone, the subject was brought before Mark in a very practical manner. Dr. Mainwaring came in to have a pipe with Mark.

'Not smoke? Why, you used to be a regular chimney in old days! And I remember telling your father you'd smoke all your brains away. And so the old lady's gone at last. I never thought she'd have lasted so long; and she would n't if Miss Belle there had n't nursed her so well. By Jove! that girl's a born nurse. I should n't have dreamt it of her! Why, neither of mine, though they're good girls, and have been, as you may say, brought up in the business, is a patch on her. One and another have been saying to me the last day or two, "What's Belle Hastings going to do now?" and I've said, "Well, she's one of the lucky ones who have their work ready to hand just when they want it. Good nurses don't go begging."'

Mark had been twisting a paper in his fingers, and not paying much attention when the doctor began; but now he was sitting bolt upright, looking intently at the good-natured face, partially obscured by clouds of smoke.

'I don't understand,' he said. 'Why should she do anything?'

'Well, of course, she seems just like your own sister; but even if she were, in these days all the girls are taking up professions—worse luck for the men, say I!—and any one with such a decided turn as Belle has would take up nursing even if she

had more than enough and to spare, which I reckon is not the case with you and her.'

There was a dangerous look in Mark's eyes, which, perhaps, the doctor did not see for the smoke; and besides, he was a person who drove straight away to the object he had in view, and did not trouble himself about anything to right or left.

'To tell you the truth, Mark, I've had my eye on this house for some time past; only, of course, as long as your mother lived I didn't say anything about it. But Tom does not make much of a living of it at Poundley, and a baby every year makes a man a bit anxious for the future; and the county people consult specialists in London if they've anything the matter with them, and the poor people go into the hospital, or if they have a doctor don't pay. Well, the long and the short of it is, I thought that if they moved into Duckington he could step by degrees into my shoes, for I am not so young as I was, and don't stand the night-work as I used. And if they were handy, just over the way like this is, the girls could help Rose with the brats, and it would be a convenience all round. You'll be glad to be quit of the house now, and I thought we could settle it as between friends, without the lawyers having a slice out of it; and I should be willing to take over the furniture — at a valuation, with an appraising look round the shabby room.

'And suppose,' said Mark when the doctor at last came to a pause — 'suppose I don't mean to give up the house?'

The doctor put down his pipe and stared across the table at Mark in amazement. No one could believe it possible that this dull, shabby old place could have any attractions for Mark, or be anything but a burden, only endured because he was obliged to keep a roof over his mother's head.

Nor could Mark have believed it till that moment when he was being so comfortably and kindly relieved of it.

'You 'll never go on living here all by yourself !'

'There 's Belle.'

'But, my dear fellow, Belle is not your sister — ' I fancy the doctor went on for some time after this, for he was long-winded in spite of a good deal of waistcoat ; but Mark heard never another word, though he said 'Yes,' and 'No,' and 'Indeed !' at intervals and more or less relevantly. He was pulling out the faded blue ribbon of his mother's yard-measure, and winding it up again carefully, so that the ribbon should not twist, which process required, apparently, immense concentration of thought ; but the fact was that the little, indistinct marks of inches and half-inches were impressing on his mind the length and the breadth of the separation that was coming so inevitably between him and little Belle, and he only roused to the present situation when the doctor rose rather huffily and bade him a curt good-night.

CHAPTER XIX.

THEY TWO.

Two bleeding hearts,
Wounded by men, by fortune tried,
Outworead with their lonely parts,
Vow to beat henceforth side by side.

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

AFTER that week of prostration Belle gradually came back to health, getting a little stronger, doing a little more every day ; and Mark kept putting off the inevitable necessity of discussing their future plans till she was quite herself again, dreading every day lest some fool should rush in where the angel of his tenderness for her feared to tread, to upset the tranquillity of those quiet spring days, which seemed to him every day more wonderfully sweet.

To come home in the evening and find Belle waiting for him, and to take her for a little turn up and down the garden-path while tea was being got ready, with her hand on his arm, for she was weak yet, and languid ; and then to come in to tea, they two together, for Miss Priscilla fancied her cup of tea earlier in the afternoon, and had generally some errand to do or a job of work to finish before the light failed. And after tea, the spring evenings being cold, they would sit over the fire and talk till the lamp came in,

when he would read to her, while Miss Priscilla sat very upright over her work, nodding spasmodically with the drowsiness of approaching bedtime.

Was the house quite as shabby and unattractive as it used to appear? Was the garden as weedy and untidy? Did the lamp smell as strongly of paraffin? And were the meals as unappetizing and squalid?

It was all just the same. He could not put his finger on a single difference, and yet he would not have exchanged it for all the beauty and luxury imaginable, and the idea of giving it up was almost intolerable to him.

But it was no use living in a fool's paradise. If he did not open the subject of the future, some one else would, perhaps in some coarse, rough way; and every time he came in he looked anxiously at the small, white face, to see if its sweet serenity had been troubled by the strife of tongues.

It remained an unexplained mystery how it was that Miss Priscilla had not ripped up the whole subject as ruthlessly as she treated a worn pillow-case or a dilapidated sheet. There was something quite cruel, Belle used to think, in the way her large scissors cut and slashed, and the girl could almost have protested or implored mercy on behalf of some harmless old piece of linen, suffering such drastic treatment at her hands.

In other matters also Miss Priscilla generally used her scissors, metaphorically, regardless of other people's feelings, but, for some unaccountable reason, she did not shape out Belle's future with a few

decided, matter-of-fact cuts, or, at any rate, if she did so in her own mind, she said nothing to the girl herself.

So that April evening, when Mark at last nerved himself to open the subject, he found the ground quite unprepared.

It was a fortnight since Mrs. Hastings' funeral, and things had already fallen into that dangerously sweet beaten track that made it so difficult to step aside once more into the howling wilderness.

Dr. Mainwaring had been a little bit gruff ever since that evening when his friendly overtures about the house had met with such a cold reception ; and several ladies in the place, notably Mrs. Butler, were considering whether it was not their duty to go and see Belle and point out the impropriety of her and Mark still making their home together. But as Belle had not been out beyond the garden, and excused herself from seeing any one on the plea of illness — though every one agreed it was quite absurd to be so upset at the death of an old woman who could have been nothing but a trouble and worry to her — she had escaped a closer acquaintance with Mrs. Grundy.

It was such a lovely evening. The lilac-bushes were unfolding fresh, little leaves, and the old apple-tree showing small, pale-green buds ; and the low sun was striking a rich beam across the garden on to a bush of dark wall-flower, bringing out its splendid glowing color, and justifying its old name of ‘bloody warrior.’

They were sitting under the apple-tree after tea, and a hundred and one good reasons for delay were busy in Mark's brain. Belle looked so fragile still, so unfit to face the cruel world. A born nurse, indeed! She wanted nursing herself, and tenderest care. Her eyes looked so large and pathetic, with that clear lustre that eyes get with watching and weeping, and the little hand that still rested on his arm was thin and transparent.

They were both looking at the wall-flower, and it was some remark about it that hurried Mark into taking the plunge which he had just resolved to put off till to-morrow.

'We will always have wall-flower there, Mark, won't we?'

It opened such an exquisitely sweet prospect of years to come, they two, side by side, watching the warm sunlight on the flowers, apart from the wearisome, hurrying world. He felt that unless he made a desperate effort there and then, all his strength and power of resistance would be overwhelmed in the delightful intoxication; and he heard his voice, in the old, dry, rasping tone it had seemed to lose of late, say, 'I wonder what Dr. Mainwaring will say to that?'

He felt her hand on his arm start, and she turned and looked at him. It was more the tone than the words that startled her; but, now having begun, he went on, knocking at a tuft of grass with the stick in his hand, as if he were bent on bruising all the young, new-springing life out of it.

‘Dr. Mainwaring wants this house for Tom Barrett and Rose, and it’s a good chance of letting it ; and he would take the furniture at a valuation.’

Her hand had crept away from his arm, and was folding the other hand in her lap very tightly.

‘But where should we go, Mark?’

He had something choking in his throat ; it seemed like anger at that inoffensive weed he was hammering at, and he did not answer directly ; and presently she repeated the question, only with a slight alteration.

‘Where should you go, Mark?’

‘Me? Oh, I don’t know and don’t care. Anywhere — into the canal there, or to the devil !’

‘Could n’t I come with you?’

He laughed a little, hard, bitter laugh. ‘Perhaps into the canal, Belle ; but I don’t think you could go to the other place if you tried, and I’m not sure that it would be thought proper for us to go together even there.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘No ; nor did I. But it seems that you and I must not live under the same roof, though we have done so pretty nearly all our lives.’

‘Why not?’

‘Heaven knows ! But that is the verdict of public opinion.’

‘But we are like brother and sister, Mark.’

‘Yes ; but only *like*.’

Then there was a long silence ; and presently Mark went on in a matter-of-fact, hard voice :

‘I have been thinking if I could find some family

where you could board, where there are some other girls. It would be nice for you. Of course I was only humbugging when I spoke of the canal. I can get a bedroom somewhere in the place, and go on at old Huxley's, at any rate for the present. So we shall see each other sometimes still, Belle—that is, if you care about it.'

'Care about it?'

'Yes, yes, I know! It's all my stupid temper. Don't mind, little Belle, what I say. It really isn't so bad. I should like you to be somewhere in the country, where there is a garden and plenty of trees and flowers; not too far off, Belle, for me to come sometimes—very often—every Sunday perhaps.'

She had got up from the seat by his side, and stood by the wall with her head turned away; but he could see her slender throat swelling and her slight shoulders quivering with an emotion that not even the tightly twisted fingers could suppress.

He bore it as long as he could. You may be sure that weed was pounded into minutest atoms by that time; and then he went and put his arm round her, and drew her back to her seat; and she was sobbing great, heart-broken sobs on his shoulder.

'Oh, Belle! what can we do?'

'I've no one but you, Mark. Why shouldn't we keep together?'

He could not trust himself to speak for a minute, so full was his heart; and perhaps he would not if he could have shortened those few minutes when she clung to him and his arm was round her. It

might be — and was something to remember in dark days to come.

She got a little calmer presently, and the sobs did not come so convulsively.

‘Why should people trouble about us, Mark? And does it matter very much if they do?’

‘You don’t know how cruel the world is, Belle.’

‘And yet I am to face it alone. Oh, Mark! why should n’t we keep together in the dear old home? Is there no way of managing it?’

How cold his hands were! He was quietly disengaging hers, that still clung to him, and he drew away the arm that clasped her round so tenderly, and got up and stood with his back to her, looking with fixed, unseeing eyes at the sluggish canal and the towing-path.

‘There is only one way, little Belle, and that is impossible.’

He half hoped, half feared that she would ask what this impossible way was; but she sat quite silent, and he could not trust himself to turn, for even the impossible will sometimes take possession of the mind with an irresistible power, and unless you keep yourself well in hand, mad words may storm forth that never can be recalled, and life is never the same again.

But his ears were alert to hear when she moved, and his heart too full of her to forget that she was weak still, and had been agitated and might want help, and he turned at once to offer it.

And so they met face to face, for she was coming

towards him ; and she put her hands in his, and looked up into his face and said, ‘ I know what you mean, Mark, but is that way impossible ? ’

‘ Why, man alive ! where on earth are you off to in such a desperate hurry ? You nearly knocked me over.’

Mr. Caxton was walking leisurely home to dinner, when some one charged out of Church Cottage — which was formerly occupied by the organist, and was now the abode of the parish clerk — coming in a fashion very unlike the staid and somewhat listless gait of Mark Hastings, whose every movement usually bore that indescribable stamp of the Ishmaelite, whose hand is against every man’s and who thinks every man’s hand is against him, though the latter part is generally in the poor Ishmaelite’s imagination.

But now it might have been a rough schoolboy flinging out of the gate, and he made a laughing apology that was most unlike his usual surly manner.

His face, too, was radiant, and Mr. Caxton, with a long experience of oaves, looked keenly at him, with a doubt lest this exhilaration might be the result of strong drink ; and Mark saw the scrutiny, and laughed again instead of savagely resenting it.

‘ I am afraid I ’m a bit off my head,’ he said, with that sudden rush of openness which sometimes occurs in a very reserved nature when the flood-gates are once opened. ‘ But when a man has been to put up

his banns, I suppose he may be allowed to feel a little out of the common.'

'Banns — eh?' said the old man.

'Yes. I don't think the old mother would think it any disrespect to her memory if Belle and I are married in a fortnight.'

CHAPTER XX.

HAPPINESS.

Then the world were not so bitter
But a smile could make it sweet.

TENNYSON.

IT would be hard to say if that fortnight were more of a paradise or a purgatory to Mark Hastings. He himself would have maintained that it was pure, unmixed happiness from beginning to end ; and I believe there were many exquisite moments when he could forget his worrying, self-torturing individuality, and allow himself to bask and expand in the genial sunshine of happiness and love. For love it was that looked serenely at him from Belle's sweet eyes ; not passionate or violent, not the love that had shaken and overmastered her as her love for Jerry did, but peaceful and trustful and content, without any ups or downs or variations of feeling, pursuing the same even, tranquil course all the way.

As long as he was with her he was satisfied — more than satisfied ; but directly they were parted, so dark a mind within him dwelt and he made himself such evil cheer that the purgatory of doubt and self-distrust flamed up in his heart, and his belief in her love for him, even the mild, sisterly love he had

always reckoned on as her feeling for him, failed and fainted, and he bitterly realized the difference between her liking for him and the passionate love that needed bolts and bars and stopped ears to keep her from the lover whose good faith her better reason doubted.

It was only because she was weak and heart-broken and ill, and the world was cruel, and she shrank from facing it, that she entertained the idea of such a sacrifice as becoming the wife of a man prematurely aged by trouble, hopelessly unattractive, sordidly poor, without any prospect of rising to better things or making a better, brighter home for his young wife.

If he had only held his tongue about that one impossible way by which they might keep together, it would never have entered her head, and after the first wrench of leaving the old home was over, Belle would have found happiness among young companions, and in surroundings more congenial to her age than she had ever experienced with him.

It was his selfishness ; and once having taken the step, there was no drawing back ; it was irretrievable ; and far down in his heart of hearts he added : ‘Thank God, it is so.’

Of course, Duckington, with the exception of Mr. Caxton, was quite electrified at hearing the banns called for the first time the following Sunday ; and such is the perversity of Mrs. Grundy, that, instead of approving heartily of what she had really been principally the means of bringing about, she said that, after all, they were too much like brother and sister,

and that there was something quite disagreeable in a marriage where people had been brought up together like those two. She was also inclined to comment on Miss Priscilla's inadequate chaperonage ; but here Mr. Caxton forestalled her by offering to put up Mark till the wedding — an invitation which Mark, in that first moment of rapture, accepted, and was not allowed to draw back, as he vainly tried to do when the first spontaneous, simple feeling had passed off, and he was beginning to torture himself with the old Ishmaelitish feeling which made him in his own opinion unfit company for man or beast.

So Belle and Miss Priscilla were left to themselves in the old home, to make such modest little preparations for the wedding as very limited means and unlimited pains would permit ; to sew and fit and starch and iron. Miss Priscilla was quite in her element, and her noisy little machine rattled away from dawn to dewy eve — the dewy eves when Mark would come in ; and Belle would lay down her seam, and they would go to the old trysting-place under the apple-tree, and Mark would forget that he was dull and poor and unattractive, that there were crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes and gray threads in his hair, and only remembered Belle, in all the peace of the ‘ perfect love that casteth out fear, because fear hath torment.’

And yet those were no lovers' talks ; they did not exchange any lovers' endearments. Sometimes she would lay her hand in easy friendliness on his arm ; sometimes he would take it for a minute in his. He

would kiss her when they met and when they parted, but the days were not long gone by when he used to kiss little Belle at morning and evening as a matter of course, and she took it now sedately, without any tinge of color in her pale cheek or shy lowering of her gentle eyes.

They talked of all manner of matter-of-fact things — the kitchen boiler, and the possibility of having a new paper in the drawing-room, and what could be done with the garden. But whatever the subject, it was all gilded and glorified to Mark by the fact that it involved their being together ; and he would have been well content to have talked forevermore about the poker, if that otherwise uninteresting article were needed for their mutual convenience.

The Mainwarings came out very kindly on this occasion, though Dr. Mainwaring felt a little bit put out at the upsetting of his nice, little plan for Tom and Rose, and thought that Mark, too, might have given him a hint of what was likely to happen that evening of the day his mother was buried, when no doubt the matter was all arranged.

Bessie Mainwaring, too, felt a little pang at this old admirer of hers marrying. She had always spoken of him as ‘ Poor Mark ! ’ with a little sentimental, conscious look, as of one who knew where Mark’s heart was and whom he would have married if circumstances had not been so adverse.

‘ And very honorable of him, too ! ’ she would say ; ‘ for, of course, father would never hear of such a thing ; and that is really why Mark Hastings will

never come near us, for fear his feelings should betray him.'

And Bessie would sigh and look as regretful as her fat, dimpled cheeks would allow, and the next minute would be chuckling (there is no other word to describe Bessie's laughter) at some inane joke of one of the succession of oaves who pervaded the place.

But oaves may come and oaves may go, and it seemed likely that Bessie Mainwaring might go on as Bessie Mainwaring forever; and now and then she had turned over in her mind as to whether even a very small income and a melancholy husband, without a bit of fun or chaff in him, might not be better than a life of single blessedness with a father subject to the gout.

So she had kept Mark as a *dernier ressort*, and it is not agreeable at thirty-five to be deprived of a *dernier ressort*.

But she and Lucy came over the very afternoon of the Sunday when the banns were called, and kissed and congratulated Belle, and made all sorts of offers of help, and wanted to know all sorts of particulars, of which Belle had hardly had time yet to think—what she was going to wear, and who would make the wedding dress, and where they would go for the honeymoon, and whom she would have for bridesmaids, with broad hints that they themselves would be quite willing to enact the part.

It quite took Belle's breath away, and so frightened and bewildered her that she could almost have retracted her promise to Mark, so terrible did the

prospect of orange-blossoms and tulle veil, rice, and satin slippers appear to her.

'Mark and I were great friends in old days,' Bessie said, 'as perhaps he may have told you; and if things had been different — perhaps — But give him my love and wish him every happiness.'

Mark found Belle looking a little thoughtful when he came in shortly afterwards, partly from the terrors that the Mainwarings seemed to consider so inseparably connected with a wedding, and without which it would hardly be complete, even if it would be quite legal; and partly from that suggestion of an early attachment between him and Bessie Mainwaring, of which he had never given her any hint.

When people are absolutely unselfish and forget themselves entirely, it sometimes happens that even those who love them best are apt to forget them too, or, at any rate, to forget that they are men of like passions to themselves; and it was quite a revelation to Belle that Mark might have had love affairs, light or serious, even in the old days when she dimly remembered him as not being so quiet and unsociable.

And it came over her with a little pang whether it was only for her sake that Mark had thought of their marrying, and whether he would not rather be free to go his own way and marry Bessie Mainwaring or some one else:

But this last idea gave such a distinctly comic turn to her thoughts that the doubt did not assume any

serious proportions, and was altogether dispelled when Mark appeared.

'Were you ever in love with Bessie Mainwaring?' she asked.

'Let me see,' he answered gravely. 'Yes; and had the measles. When I was in Eton jackets I was very far gone on her, and I remember kissing her once at a Christmas party; and I'm not sure that I have not still a lock of her hair. What a good thing she is plentifully supplied with hair, for I expect half the male population of Duckington possess some of it. But she's a good creature, Belle, and it's a shame to laugh at her. I've been horridly bearish and surly to them, but we'll try to be more neighborly now.'

So Belle tried to accept graciously the Mainwarings' offers of help, though she infinitely preferred sitting up at her sewing alone with Miss Priscilla, and hearing long-winded stories of Duckington past and present, which only required an occasional monosyllable, more or less *apropos*, to keep them going peacefully all the time. She was rather relieved to find that the Mainwarings were more liberal in words than in deeds, not having grown more energetic with increasing years and waists.

Bessie, indeed, came over one day with her thimble, prepared to work away at the muslin dress which Belle, much against the Mainwaring advice, had chosen for her wedding attire. But Bessie had been bicycling all the morning, and was so sleepy that she nodded off two or three times over her seam, and was only

roused by the appearance across the road of several flannel-clad figures, rackets in hand, who demanded her instant attendance on the tennis-lawn.

'So tiresome, when I told them not to come to-day! But I'll run in the first thing to-morrow. It's really too awfully provoking!'

But next morning she had squeezed her finger in a folding-chair, and was therefore incapacitated for needlework; so, as she could not be a bit of use to dear Belle, she had accepted an invitation to a water-picnic; and she ran off, after profuse apologies and regrets, leaving Belle well content at her absence.

That fortnight at Mr. Caxton's was undoubtedly good for Mark, and made him more human, and smoothed off some of his angles and general crustiness. He had to get out his dress-clothes, which had not seen the light since his father's death, and which, though, of course, a little antiquated in cut, still fitted and became him well; and he had a shame-faced pleasure in appearing in them before Belle, who wondered and admired in a manner highly gratifying to poor Mark, who had gone shabby and slipshod so long that he had almost forgotten the exhilarating self-respect that the consciousness of being well dressed brings with it.

And Mr. Caxton was such a first-rate host. No one could feel rusty or awkward or out of place in his company; and he had always had a liking for and interest in Mark, and they had a good deal in common; and he knew how to draw Mark out and make him feel at home and at his ease.

And the easy comfort of the house, in contrast with the poverty and shabbiness of his own, did Mark good, though he used it skilfully for self-torture in thinking that he was dooming Belle to that same poverty and shabbiness all her life. The comfortable chairs, the good cooking, the flowers and well-trained servants, the cigars and fragrant coffee, the books and newspapers, all combined to make Mark feel like any other man, and to take away that prickly sensitiveness that is such a torment to its possessor and to all his friends.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WEDDING DAY.

Oh, let the solid ground
Not fail beneath my feet
Before my life has found
What some have found so sweet.
Then let come what come may
To a life that has been so sad,
I shall have had my day.

TENNYSON.

MARK woke on the morning of his wedding day full of a happiness that would have been sublime but for a small incident that had occurred the day before, which slightly jarred on him when it came back to his memory.

He and Belle had sat late under the apple-tree. He lost all sense of the poverty and shabbiness when he was there, in the shabby old home, with her, though he exaggerated all its defects when he was away, and pitied her for the sordid prospect her marriage with him entailed. The trim grass and gay spring beds at Mr. Caxton's were not to be compared to the ragged, old apple-tree, on which the sweet pink blossom was coming out, and the straggling, untidy bushes of wall-flower still in rich, fragrant bloom.

They had sat mostly in silence, hand in hand, with no fond words or tremulous whispers or protestations of affection. They had watched the moon come up cold and quiet, touching the ivy on the gables of the next house with silver, and riding serenely through the hurrying little clouds that had not reached so sublime a calm.

The wedding was to be at nine o'clock next morning, and Mr. Caxton was to give the bride away, and there was to be no one present besides except Miss Priscilla. They were to come back to the old home for Belle to put on her black dress again, and to have a bit of the cake, on which Miss Priscilla had insisted so vehemently that there was no gainsaying her. And then they were to journey away to a little out-of-the-way seaside place on the Dorsetshire coast.

Belle had never seen the sea, and here they were to spend the few days Mark could be spared from the office and the organ.

They talked more of the sea that evening than of anything else, and how they would see that same moon drawing a long, rippling line to their feet, as if it were shining for them alone, and yet it would be doing the same for hundreds and thousands besides, whether they noticed it or not; a very simple, optical fact no doubt, but beautifully suggestive of the Divine love, at once so general and so individual.

She put on her wedding-dress for him to see, and came down the garden-path in the moonlight, all in white; and he felt a kind of awe of her, as if the

rough old garden were holy ground and he should have knelt and worshipped ; and, indeed, he made an excuse, when a straggling branch caught the edge of the skirt, to kneel and disentangle it and kiss the hem.

'Mr. Caxton is going to send you some real orange-blossom, Belle,' he said, trying to steady his voice and speak in as matter-of-fact a way as possible. 'I shall bring it early to-morrow morning. And now I must go. Was that eleven striking? Good-night, little Belle.'

And he left her standing under the apple-tree, as white and pure and calm as the gentle moon above ; and when he turned at the door she still stood there, only she was looking away towards the canal and the towing-path, and he went away with a dull little pain at his heart.

Mr. Caxton was writing when Mark went into his library, and he looked up with a nod, and bade Mark light a cigar and have a look at the paper, and he should be ready for a chat in a couple of minutes.

And so Mark bestowed himself luxuriously in one of the deep arm-chairs, and picked up the nearest paper that came to hand, which proved to be a society paper of a sort not usually much affected by Mr. Caxton, who had not a vivid interest in the private concerns of the aristocracy.

And the first paragraph that caught Mark's eye was : 'We are informed that the marriage arranged between Sir Gerald Haviland of Poundley and Mrs.

Trevor of Half-Moon Street, Mayfair, will not take place.'

Nothing had been heard of Sir Gerald for some months — at least Mark had heard nothing ; and now that he was released from his promise to report all he heard to Belle, news did not strike his ear so readily as it had done when he would have been glad to hear nothing.

'Are you looking at that paragraph about Haviland's match being broken off?' Mr. Caxton's voice broke in on Mark's ponderings. 'Lucas brought in the paper. I never thought it very likely to come off, and especially as it hung fire so. Ah, you see, Hastings, your plan is the best. Strike while the iron 's hot, and put up the banns the day you propose. But I expect poor Haviland will be in a mess with his creditors, and especially with all those alterations at Poundley. I am sorry for Lady Haviland ; she 's a very old friend of mine, and this will be a great blow to her. It means another long let of the old place, and they were beginning to talk of his standing for the county. Well, it 's hard lines on poor Haviland ; but perhaps he was n't sorry to get out of the bargain. She may have been dear even at that price. I can't say she took my fancy particularly.'

Mr. Caxton found Mark a little bit *distract* and absent-minded that night ; but what can you expect of a man on the eve of his wedding? And it was that paragraph about Gerald Haviland that stole into Mark's thoughts of sublime happiness on his wedding morning, though reason told him that it made no

difference as far as Belle was concerned, and that no doubt Gerald Haviland would seek another heiress to reinstate his fallen fortunes.

It was such a typical wedding morning in early May, with a cloudless pearly sky, and with that indescribable freshness and sense of growth and young life that makes early May so beautiful. Mr. Caxton came into Mark's room in his dressing-gown, with some sprays of orange-blossom, waxy white against the glossy green leaves, and a bunch of dewy lilies of the valley, freshly picked, with plenty of beautiful leaves — just a bunch put together anyhow, as they were picked, which is often the best and most tasteful arrangement, following the lovely anyhow of nature. A rough sort of bridal bouquet, you would think, and just tied together with a piece of gardener's bass with Mr. Caxton's own hands, which had also picked them from the lily-bed under the wall, in defiance of the heavy May-dew which had soaked his slippers.

'I thought your little bride would like this better than one of those marvellous shower bouquets, all wire and pretence, with the flowers tortured into all sorts of artificial elegance. Give it to her with an old man's love and blessing. And I don't mind telling you what I've not let any one else know, that fifty years ago there was a girl I pretty nearly broke my heart about. But hearts are tough things, Mark, and don't break as easily as we are apt to fancy in our youth. Your Belle reminds me a bit now and then of what she was, with those dark-gray eyes of hers.'

'Did she die?'

'No; she married some one else. It was n't likely she 'd be allowed to marry her brother's tutor. She 's a grandmother now, and weighs fifteen stone.—There 's the postman. You 'll be able to fetch your letters when you take the flowers round.'

Mark's correspondence was not of so extensive a character that it was necessary to make his movements depend on the postal delivery ; nor was it as a rule of a very enlivening description, as it frequently brought returned manuscripts from magazines, and such missives, however frequent, never quite lose their power of annoyance.

But even a returned manuscript would hardly have the power to disturb the tranquil happiness that filled Mark's heart as he wended his way to the old home, along the quiet streets ; for Duckington is not an early-rising place, and only here and there a frowsy servant was sweeping down a doorstep or a milk-cart rattled in from the country.

The postman was delivering the letters in front of him along the street, with a tap-tap wherever he found a knocker ; but at Mark's house Alice was washing the doorstep, with her fringe twisted up in hairpins in preparation for the wedding, and her short, tucked-up petticoats giving a very liberal display of thin legs and holes in the stockings ; and to her the postman handed the letter, which she received in a very dirty apron, and handed it on to Mark, who came up the moment after.

Only a very uninteresting, business-looking blue

letter, directed in a stiff, legal hand — a circular or a bill, most likely ; and he tossed it on the hall table, while he went in search of a basin of water in which to put the flowers.

Miss Priscilla was stirring also, but in too great *deshabille* to do more than bid him good-morning over the banisters, and promise to convey Mr. Caxton's message of love and blessing to Belle.

The wind from the open door had blown the blue letter off the hall table as Mark came out, and it was only accidentally that his eye lighted on it in the corner ; and he picked it up and put it into his pocket, without even enough curiosity to open it.

Half-an-hour later, as Mr. Caxton was finishing his shaving — which was always an elaborate and careful business, and not deputed to the barber, as is the fashion among young men in these degenerate days — a knock came to his door, and Mark came in.

Mr. Caxton was just at that critical angle by the corner of the mouth that requires such concentration of attention, and even a bridegroom, he felt, might wait the requisite half-minute for completing the business. But a glimpse he got of Mark's face, reflected over his shoulder in the looking-glass, stopped his hand in the very act, and the shaving was never finished that day.

Mark's face was gray with an anguish that, in all his experience of human life and its sorrows and mysterious sufferings, Mr. Caxton had never seen more vividly expressed.

Less than an hour ago, when Mark had taken the

flowers, Mr. Caxton had noticed how great a beautifier happiness is, how young he looked, how softened ! ‘He really is not at all a bad-looking fellow,’ Mr. Caxton had said to himself. And Mark had gone out holding his head erect and without that stoop that had grown on him of late years.

But now the youth and the softness and the good looks were gone, and there was only a set, hard look of determination on the haggard face.

‘There will be no wedding to-day,’ he said, and his voice sounded strange and stiff and hard ; ‘and I want you to go to her and tell her so, and that I am going away somewhere abroad, but anyhow I shall never come back any more. . . . No, I am not mad or drunk. I know what I’m saying, and you’ll understand my motives when you read this. But I can’t stay, for I must catch the eight train. And tell her not to be unhappy about me. I shall be all right. And tell her she is quite free, and—God bless her !’

His voice shook and broke, but with a desperate effort he pulled himself together. ‘I want you to stand her friend, and to help her in her business matters. She is so friendless. Thank you for all you have done, and still more for all that I know you will do for her. You said she was like the girl you loved. Take care of her.’

And then he was gone, leaving that same blue letter in Mr. Caxton’s hand.

‘I ought to have kept him by force,’ Mr. Caxton used to accuse himself in days to come. ‘I ought to

have locked the door and kept the young lunatic. I ought to have knocked him down rather than let him go.'

And Belle would shake her head sadly, looking at the frail old figure and picturing the desperate strength of Mark's resolution.

The letter was as follows :

14 GRAY'S INN SQUARE, W. C.,
May 6, 189—.

DEAR SIR,—

Re JOHN MANNERS' DEED.

We are instructed by our client, Mr. Parsons, until recently resident at Waratonga, New South Wales, to communicate with you in regard to the estate of the above-named testator.

We understand from our client that you are unacquainted with the history of the matter, and we therefore find it necessary to offer a few words of preliminary explanation.

It appears that your late father was appointed by Mr. Manners' will sole trustee of his estate for the benefit of his daughter, Isabel Manners, spinster, with full discretionary powers as to its investment and disposition during her minority. A few years after Mr. Manners' death your father was, it seems, desirous of retiring from the trust, and accordingly, under his statutory powers for that purpose, appointed our client to be the trustee of Mr. Manners' will in his place, with strict injunctions (the motive of which has not been explained to us by our client, but which he seems to have complied with) that no part of the estate or the income thereof should be applied for Miss Manners' benefit during her minority, and, indeed, that no communication whatever should be made to her on the subject during that period.

We understand that Miss Manners (if she is in fact living, as to which we have no definite information) will attain her twenty-first year on the twelfth day of June next, and will thereupon become absolutely entitled to receive the whole of the estate and the accumulations of the income of it made during her infancy.

We are referred by our client to you, as being the person most likely to give us information as to Miss Manners' whereabouts, and we shall feel obliged if you will furnish us with that information, and let us know her present address, and whether she is still single or under coverture.

For your and her guidance we enclose a short statement of the particulars of the trust fund, and of the securities in which it is at present invested. On hearing from you in reply to this, a full statement of account will be supplied to Miss Manners, and her instructions taken as to how she wishes the fund to be disposed of. Awaiting the favour of your early answer, —

We are, dear Sir, yours faithfully,

COX AND SON.

CHAPTER XXII.

FORSAKEN.

There 's rosemary, that 's for remembrance ;
And there 's pansies, that 's for thoughts.

SHAKESPEARE.

IT was just like a fairy tale, the Mainwarings declared ; just every bit like Cinderella, this big fortune suddenly turning up for poor little Belle, whom nobody thought anything of, who never had on anything fit to be seen, and was going to be married in a plain muslin frock, made by herself and that old frump, Miss Priscilla.

But they had always said, and they appealed to one another to corroborate the statement, which they neither of them could honestly do, that there was something distinguished about Belle, and unlike other girls, and no doubt, now that she would be properly dressed, she would be quite good-looking, for there really was something taking about her. No doubt that sly old fox Mark knew all about it, and was keeping it dark till after the wedding ; for, of course, now Belle could do much better, and every one knew she was only marrying Mark to keep a roof over her head.

And what a sell for Mark that it came out the very morning of the wedding, though he had hurried it on as much as ever he could, having the wedding before

his mother was hardly cold in her grave, which they had always said was scarcely decent.

Mr. Caxton spent most of that day with Belle, who sat, a poor little, forlorn figure, still in the despised white muslin, which made her look very childish and simple. She was still weak and shaken by her late illness, and this fresh blow seemed to stun her, and she was quite unable to realize or grasp what had happened.

The room was full of the heavy scent of the lilies which still stood in the water where Mark had placed them, and on the sideboard was the modest little wedding-cake, ordered to satisfy Miss Priscilla's sense of the fitness of things, having a little white chalk vase at the top with orange-blossoms and silver leaves, and a couple of fat doves, apparently engaged in mortal combat, on either side.

The only thing that Belle seemed to understand, and that roused her from the dull, puzzled dream into which she had sunk, was the fact that at any rate part of the blame that had fallen so thick and heavy on the head of her kind old guardian was removed.

It was plain that in those days, when the speculating fever was strong on him, and had reached that pitch when the temptation to venture other people's money as well as his own was almost irresistible, he had made a desperate effort to protect from himself the little, dark-eyed girl with whom he played so merrily under the apple-tree. Her fortune should be put clean out of his power to meddle with, even though he felt confident, as speculators always do, that he could double and treble it with the greatest

ease and with the smallest possible risk. He was not sure that he was not doing an ill turn to his little playmate by not laying out her money to advantage, as he so well knew how to do, and by handing it over without recall to a man who had very little idea beyond consols.

But his good angel kept him to his purpose, which, if only Mark had known, might have saved endless compunction and heart-burning, and have altogether averted this last miserable, heart-breaking episode.

Mark, too, hurrying away from love and hope and happiness, picked this small crumb of comfort out of the ruins, that at any rate, so far, his poor old father's character was reinstated, and that he himself had been preserved miraculously, at the very last moment, from committing an act in the innocence of his heart which would have burdened him with unavailing remorse for the rest of his days.

Now there seemed no reason why all should not go right for little Belle's happiness. This fortune of hers, which even the passing glance he had given at the list of investments was enough to assure him was very considerable, coupled with that announcement in the paper (could it be only last night that he had read it?) of Gerald Haviland's broken engagement, seemed two very substantial foundation-stones on which to build the palace in which she would live happily ever after ; and the process of erection need not be delayed by distance or mistakes or misrepresentations, seeing that Mr. Caxton was, he knew, a friend of Lady Haviland's, and often in communica-

tion with her, so that the news of Belle's sudden accession of wealth, and her marvellous escape from an ill-starred marriage, would certainly find its way to Sir Gerald's ears before many days were past.

Dear little Belle ! She would be grieved and frightened at his sudden disappearance, and perhaps she might make some efforts to find him, and try to induce him to return. But her distress would be only temporary ; soon, perhaps even now, the sense of infinite relief would dawn on her, and the radiance of restored love turn her poor little twilight of resignation and patience into the full noon-day of happiness. And then the tender little heart would feel compunction at its own bliss, and she would say, 'Poor Mark ! Poor, dear old Mark !' And then Jerry would come and she would forget.

His fellow-passengers, through that long day which took him every heavy minute farther and farther away from Belle, looked at him askance. Girls thought him rude and brutal and ill-mannered for his oblivious disregard of their little needs in the matter of opening the door or reaching parcels from the net. Old maids thought he might be a murderer, and started and shivered every time he made any movement. A detective looked at him scrutinizingly, as possibly some one who was 'wanted' by the law ; and a medical student did the same, as some one 'wanting' who might have escaped from a lunatic asylum ; and a plausible, civil-spoken young man, who accosted him once or twice, weighed for some time the question whether he would not be a good subject for the

confidence trick ; while a baby stared serenely at him for half-an-hour, and ultimately, with greater penetration than any of the others had displayed, presented him confidingly with her doll.

If Mark could have known it, the prospect of a speedy explanation between Jerry and Belle was more probable than he had imagined ; for as Mr. Caxton, sorely perturbed and disquieted, was making his way home from his long, ineffectual attempt to comfort Belle, whom should he meet but Lady Haviland herself ? With a sudden inspiration, he told her in a few words what had happened, and asked her to come and see Belle, which was a great compliment to Lady Haviland's tact and discretion, as Mr. Caxton had strongly urged on Miss Priscilla the necessity of refusing admission to all those chattering jays of women — begging their pardons — the Duckington ladies.

And so it was that a few minutes later, without waiting to be announced, and leaving Alice staring in the hall, wondering if this elegant and gracious lady would come under the head of a chattering jay, Lady Haviland went down the garden to where Belle sat, listless and inert, with great sad eyes, gazing blankly before her, without any sign of that dawn of happiness and relief on which Mark was even then reckoning.

' My poor little girl ! ' Lady Haviland said, taking the young head in her arms, and pressing the sad little face to her breast. ' Tell me all about it.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

COMING RIGHT.

Memories that make the heart a tomb,
Regrets which glide through the spirit's gloom,
And with ghastly whispers tell
That joy, once lost, is peace.

SHELLEY.

CERTAINLY Belle's love-story seemed coming right with unbelievable rapidity, without half the reverses and ups and downs which were necessary when romances had to take the three-volume form ; for, after that tremendous Niagara fall that had disturbed the course of Jerry's and Belle's stream of true love, and had bidden fair to dissipate it altogether, it seemed running smoothly and peacefully towards the happy consummation, the sea of matrimony. Before Belle had time to realize who it was that came with such motherly tenderness, and took her into such kind arms, and looked with such pitiful, gentle eyes, Lady Haviland had established herself as the friend and comforter of the desolate girl.

If Belle had understood at first that this was Gerald Haviland's mother, she might have shrunk away, or resisted the fascination of her gracious charm ; but it was only by degrees that she realized

why the look in the eyes, and certain tones of the voice, and movements of the hands were so familiar to her, and recognized that it was Jerry himself who was looking at and speaking to her with his mother's eyes and voice.

On the one occasion when she had seen Lady Haviland before, and been captivated with her, she had not known that Jerry was one and the same with 'Sir Gerald' and 'my son' of whom she talked to the organist; and even now the two seemed very distinct in her mind, so that it was only the likeness that would now and then catch her breath, and strike a chill to her heart, and check the spontaneous flow of confidence and affection, while the mention of 'Sir Gerald' or 'my son' passed almost unnoticed as some one she did not know.

Lady Haviland's kindness and liking for Belle was quite sincere, and, at any rate at first, had no ulterior motives; and I believe she would have acted in exactly the same way if Belle had been only the sweet, little, dark-eyed girl who had taken her fancy at their first meeting at the organist's, or any other cottage maiden deserted on her wedding day in so strange and cruel a manner.

I say at any rate at first she had no ulterior motive, for it is not in human nature, least of all maternal human nature possessing an only and impecunious son in desperate straits for money, not to just glance at the possibility of an alliance with this girl's fortune. It was not handicapped, as so many fortunes are, with an unattractive or repulsive bride, but was in the

possession of a sweet, little, unaffected, simple girl, whom, apart from the money, Lady Haviland would have picked out as an acceptable daughter-in-law, and who was as yet quite unspoilt, and had not had her head turned by the possession of wealth, or learnt to be purse-proud and self-important.

Of course, the world of Duckington did not give Lady Haviland credit for the purity of her intentions, and indeed they felt themselves greatly aggrieved at her swooping down in the very nick of time, and establishing herself as guide, philosopher, and friend to a girl she had not taken the slightest notice of when she was poor.

‘Little Belle, that we’ve nursed when she was a baby !’ the Mainwarings said, in their indignation, forgetting the importance of keeping relative ages in abeyance.

‘And the fortunes we’ve spent in chocolates for her !’

‘And the games we used to have with her !’

And the rest of Duckington joined in the chorus of indignation, and recalled minute acts of kindness, and magnified them and multiplied them, and imagined a few more, till you might have thought that all Duckington had hovered around Belle’s childhood and girlhood, vying with each other to please and amuse and advise and care for her.

And now, when some slight return for all this milk of human kindness might be expected, Alice doggedly refused to admit any of them on whatever pretext, while Lady Haviland’s little pony-carriage stood day

after day at the door, under the hot fire of indignant glances from the doctor's windows.

'Well, anyhow,' the doctor said, 'we shall get that house for Tom and Rose. It's not the sort of house for ten thousand a year, or whatever it is my young lady's come into.'

But even this small consolation was not allowed them; for on applying to Mr. Caxton, who, it appeared, was to manage Belle's business matters—another grievance in Duckington, who still regarded Mr. Caxton as a new-comer in spite of his fifteen years' residence there—he said that Miss Manners—another aggravation, the use of this name, when she had always been known as Belle Hastings—had no intention of parting with the house at present.

This was contrary to Mr. Caxton's own advice, as, when all the means they had employed to trace Mark had failed, he strongly urged upon Belle to go away and travel, and make a decided break away from the old, dull, depressing life, and see something of the bright, beautiful world outside.

But Belle seemed so heart-broken at the idea of giving up the old home, and so to shrink from any lengthened absence from it, unless it was absolutely necessary, that Mr. Caxton was obliged to allow that a young lady with her income might indulge in a whim if she had one, even such an apparently unreasonable one as keeping an old, dilapidated house in a country town, greatly out of repair, and yet a Naboth's vineyard much desired by the doctor opposite.

When Mr. Caxton consulted Lady Haviland on the subject, that lady treated the matter as of no consequence, saying that anything Belle did now was of a purely temporary character, and that it was really quite a good thing that she had not a lot of ideas and theories, as so many girls have nowadays, which might hurry her into plans and arrangements that might be an embarrassment later on.

'You think she is sure to marry?' Mr. Caxton said, interpreting the meaning in Lady Haviland's words.

'More than probable.'

The ulterior motive stage had been reached by this time, and Lady Haviland, in the course of a drive which she had taken Belle that afternoon, had been comparing her at every turn with her late prospective daughter-in-law, Mrs. Trevor, greatly to Belle's advantage.

She had accepted Mrs. Trevor as an inevitable part of the fortune that was needed to reinstate Poundley, and she had honestly and conscientiously made the best of her, and assured herself and Gerald, and all the world, that she was very fond of her and perfectly satisfied.

But every now and then, in their more intimate moments, Lady Haviland seemed to reach beyond the elegance and refinement to something that jarred her with a touch of commonness and vulgarity, and she shrank back, and felt it was safer to keep nearer the outside, and be content with the brilliancy and sparkle.

But with Belle there was nothing of this; there

was nothing disappointing or jarring ; the worst you came on—and sometimes Lady Haviland thought this was the best rather than the worst of Belle—was ignorance and simplicity, and this gave a freshness in the intercourse with her, a spice of the uncertain quantity which made it interesting, instead of the conventional second-hand opinions that are so monotonous in most girls of her age.

‘But she was greatly attached to Mark Hastings.’

Lady Haviland gave a slightly perceptible shrug of the shoulders.

‘She is very young.’

They were sitting at tea on the terrace at Poundley. Lady Haviland had found Mr. Caxton there on her return from her drive with Belle.

It was early June, and the view from the terrace at Poundley was very beautiful, over the wide-spread-
ing lush-meadows, rippled by the breeze, and the great masses of trees in full leaf, still showing some variety of tints before settling to summer’s splendid monotony.

They were such old friends that they did not need to keep up a continuous conversation, and there were frequent long pauses, during which their thoughts wandered away, sent off at a tangent by some word, or by the soft fall of some pink rose-leaves from the great bush close at hand—an old-fashioned cabbage-rose, sprawling luxuriantly over the balustrade, and doing its one flowering with an energy and a bounty and a glory unknown to the perpetual blooming new varieties.

'Very young,' and the roses had sent both these old people back to their spring-time. To him youth had proved no healer of heart-wounds ; the scar was still there of the wound inflicted on it at twenty. She had had so pleasant and happy a married life that it was not easy to remember a girlish, silly love affair that had been wisely put a stop to by discerning friends, at the cost of many tears and vows of eternal fidelity.

'And she has seen no one else,' went on Lady Haviland, recalling what a difference a wider experience of society had made to her, and how a military ball had very effectually obliterated the image of the curate with a bad complexion which she thought had been indelibly printed on her heart.

'And, from what I hear, Mark Hastings was not a very attractive person. By-and-by, when Belle is better, she must go into society a bit. Oh, she will have her choice ; there is no fear of that. She is sweetly pretty, and with her fortune there will be no lack of suitors. The only trouble will be to keep off fortune-hunters. Upon my word, Mr. Caxton, you have an arduous task before you !'

'I have been counting on your ladyship's help.'

'I'm too old for the part, old friend. And, moreover, there are no more London seasons and introducing *débutantes* for me. I am going back to the south of France for good and all. Gerald will let Poundley again on a long term ; and, in fact, I'm only down here now for a last look at the old place. It is a grand mistake taking last looks. It's only

giving one's self unnecessary pain. But I'm not sorry that I came, for the poor little girl's sake. How would it be for me to carry her off with me for a bit? It might help to break her in to her changed fortunes; and meanwhile —' she paused, only for a second, after that 'meanwhile,' but the momentary pause was sufficient for both her and Mr. Caxton to fill in an easy and agreeable solution to the difficulty before Lady Haviland went on quickly — 'you might be looking about for a suitable chaperon for her.'

'I think it would be the very best thing for her,' Mr. Caxton said; but he was not thinking so much of the advantage for Belle of a few months' travelling with Lady Haviland's cultured society, but of Belle as mistress of Poundley, with that cultured companionship always at hand in her mother-in-law.

'Poor Mark!' he said to himself, with a little sigh.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PAST TENSE.

But love strikes one hour, Love ! Those never loved
Who dreamed that they loved once.

MRS. BROWNING.

AFTER all it was not quite directly that Gerald Haviland heard of Belle's change of fortune ; for Lady Haviland had too much tact to openly betray her wishes, knowing by experience that men are like another kind of animal who are much more likely to take the desired path if another is pointed out to them. She knew also that he was still a little sore and smarting from the breaking off of his engagement with Mrs. Trevor, which came very near to his being jilted ; for, though it was said to have been by mutual consent, the speedy announcement of her approaching marriage with a Russian prince made society a little incredulous as to whether Gerald's consent had had much to do with it.

Lady Haviland was not quite sure, either how far Gerald's affections were concerned, and if he really were attached to her whom Lady Haviland allowed herself now to call, in the privacy of her own thoughts, 'that odious widow.'

Well, whether it was pride or affection that was wounded, it was equally necessary to move warily

in suggesting a successor to Mrs. Trevor, as wounded pride is often quite as painful as, and perhaps more incurable than, wounded love.

And besides, he was harassed and worried with business matters, and now was in London holding daily sessions with his solicitor in Lincoln's Inn Fields, trying to disentangle the perplexing maze of his very involved affairs.

So, when she wrote to him, her letters being mainly about business matters, she only casually mentioned that she was interested in a nice sort of girl in Duckington — a Miss Manners — and thought of proposing to her to join her when she went abroad.

But Gerald had never heard of Miss Manners, and he never associated the name with Belle, who had been just simply Belle to him for so long, and of late Belle Hastings, as she had been to the rest of Duckington. And yet it brought back to his mind the fancy his mother had taken to Belle when she saw her at the organist's, and how she had spoken of her likeness to a Madonna she had seen at Florence. His mother was given to these sudden fancies ; and it was a good thing if she had found some one to interest her and distract her a little from the painful business of leaving Poundley.

He was quite of his mother's opinion that last looks were a mistake ; and he had fully made up his mind that, if the business arrangements could be carried out without his presence at Poundley, he would save himself the unnecessary pain. But when he thought

of last looks, it was not so much the old home and the family portraits, and all the associations connected with the place, nor the spreading park and great trees, and the river winding through, but a spring wood, where the birds were singing and the primroses in bloom (it was always spring, and the birds never ceased to sing or the primroses to bloom in that wood in his memory), and a garden wall rising from a towing-path. But there it was always winter and dark, with sleet falling, and he would have given all he possessed to wipe that bitter memory from his mind.

'I don't want ever to see the place again,' he told himself; and yet, one hot afternoon, coming out of the musty office after a more than usually depressing interview with his lawyer, he stood for a moment hesitating on the dusty pavement, looking at the great plane-trees in the square, whose leaves had already lost all appearance of spring or youth, and then was seized with a longing for the big elm-trees and waving grass and broad acres and sweet air of Poundley; and forthwith he hailed a hansom, and, picking up his portmanteau at his hotel, drove right off to Paddington, with the sort of feeling of a naughty boy running away from school.

Arrived at Duckington, he left his traps to follow, and walked off towards Poundley, avoiding, however, the short cut across the fields, which led too near that spring wood we know of. Across the park and up those old stone steps into the garden — the way he had gone with little Belle that pleasant day long

ago, astonishing her by his audacity — and in at the open hall-door ; and there, in the inner hall, standing looking up at the portrait over the fireplace, was, as then, Belle herself.

This was the first time that Lady Haviland had been able to prevail upon Belle to come up to Poundley, and it was not till the elder lady had begun to be a little vexed at the girl's reluctance that Belle had yielded, and at the end of a long drive allowed her friend to bring her back to tea.

' I shall be quite alone, Belle,' Lady Haviland had said ; ' and there is no one, really, to eat you up, so you need not look so large-eyed and terrified. And there are so many things I want to show you. You saw the pictures years ago, did n't you ? But I should like to tell you about them myself, as I don't expect the housekeeper, or whoever showed you round, did them justice. And the roses on the terrace are really worth coming to see, if there were nothing else ; and Barton shall drive you back in the cool of the evening, with a big bunch of roses for Miss Priscilla. There 's a bribe for you ! '

Lady Haviland wondered at the girl's evident nervousness as they drove up to the house. What a shy, sensitive little thing she must be when even going into a strange house will drive the slight color from her face and give such a startled, troubled look to her eyes !

It was evidently an effort for her to go up the steps at the entrance, and Lady Haviland made an excuse of being tired and wanting her support to

take her arm and draw her into the inner hall, cool and dark with its oak panels.

'There, wait here for me while I take off my bonnet. Sit down a minute or two. I shan't be long. Or, if you like, have a look at that picture over the fireplace. It is one of the ancestors, and, they say, has a wonderful likeness to my son.'

And then Lady Haviland went upstairs, leaving Belle in the hall; and, as sometimes happens with mistresses of households, she was delayed by some domestic questions requiring decision, and the minute or two extended to twenty, in the course of which, as we have seen, Gerald Haviland appeared on the scene.

Belle was standing looking up at the portrait, and had taken off her hat to look up at it more easily. A slight, girlish figure in black, with so small and white a face that the great, dark eyes looked out of proportion.

'Belle!' he said, and, hardly knowing what he did, he made a step forward with his hands stretched out, as if he would have taken her in his arms, and with a startled cry of terror she fled away up the broad staircase, like a wild creature flying for its life.

'Why, Gerald,' Lady Haviland said, coming down a few minutes later, 'you have frightened that poor child nearly out of her wits! And what ill-luck brought you here just at the moment when I had persuaded her, with the utmost difficulty, to come to tea with me, under the solemn assurance that not a

soul would be here but myself? She is in the most extraordinarily nervous, overwrought condition. I suppose it is the effect of her illness, and of all she 's gone through. And you look as though you had seen a ghost, too. Here, come out and have some tea. It 's ready on the terrace, and by-and-by I 'll go and coax her to come down. Really, I shall think twice about taking her with me abroad if she 's such a bundle of nerves.'

'Take her abroad?'

'Yes; did n't I tell you?'

'You said something about a Miss Manners.'

'Well, this is Miss Manners; only no one thought her worthy of her proper name till she came into a lot of money.'

'A lot of money?'

'Yes. Have n't you heard? It is a most romantic story. A fortune that was supposed to have been swindled away by the late manager of the bank has suddenly turned up safe and sound, and largely increased by accumulations. She was just going to marry Mark Hastings, the son of her old guardian. Ah! do you know him?' For Gerald had made a sudden involuntary exclamation.

'By sight, yes, I think I did. I suppose he knew of this concealed fortune all along?'

'No; it appears that he knew nothing of it.'

Gerald laughed incredulously.

'And when the young lady discovered it she broke off the marriage?'

There was a strange, harsh tone in Gerald's usually

pleasant, easy-going voice, that made his mother look curiously at him.

‘On the contrary, it was Mark Hastings who went off the very morning of the marriage, no one knows where, only leaving a message for Belle with Mr. Caxton to say that she was free and he was never coming back any more. Public opinion in Duckington is divided as to whether he is a knave or a fool, and Mr. Caxton thinks he is a hero, and I am inclined to agree with him.’

Then there was a long silence between mother and son, and as Lady Haviland busied herself with the tea-making she stole a glance now and then at her son, and noticed how by degrees his brows unknit and the lines softened round his mouth and the old boyish look came into his eyes, that recalled the times when he was called Jerry and life was all sunshine ; and a flutter of hope stirred in the mother’s heart that the sunshine might be coming back into her boy’s life, to reflect brightness into her old age.

‘Do you know,’ he said at last, ‘this is not my first introduction to Miss — Manners ; is that the name ? — though I had not a notion who it was when you mentioned her in your letter. When she was a little bit of a girl, we had quite a small flirtation over her garden wall, which gives on the towing-path by the canal. Did n’t I ever tell you of a little, gypsy-looking girl who gave me button-holes and watched for me that time when I was coaching with old Caxton ? And I ’ve seen her since now and again, and noticed what a pretty child she was.’

'She never told me she had met you,' Lady Haviland said.

'No? Well, very likely she hardly knew who I was. I'm sure I never dreamt she was the Miss Manners you wrote about, and, indeed, it was only of late years that I knew she was something to do with the Hastings.'

Presently Lady Haviland went in and brought Belle out. She had regained her composure, and was much ashamed of her precipitate flight, for which Lady Haviland gently scolded her.

'And Gerald tells me he used to know you when you were a little girl, so he is not a stranger; and he was quite distressed at having alarmed you so. It was a sudden idea, his coming down. Poor fellow! he has been greatly worried over business, and I had no idea he would have been able to get away.'

Lady Haviland had, as we have seen, a wonderful art of putting people at their ease, and, under her protection, Belle found herself sitting on the terrace with a cup of tea in her hand, while Sir Gerald and his mother talked, with an occasional reference to her, which she answered rather breathlessly and at random at first, till by degrees her heart left off beating in such great thumps and her voice seemed more under control, and she could raise her cup to her lips without the cup and saucer clattering together in such a ridiculous manner.

And presently Lady Haviland got up to pick the bunch of roses she had promised to Miss Priscilla, and Sir Gerald and Belle were left alone.

‘You are not going to run away again?’ he said, for the frightened look was coming back into her eyes, and she made a half-movement to follow Lady Haviland.

‘Won’t you let me congratulate you, Belle?’

He could almost see how his voice had power to thrill her, and when he spoke her name her hands twisted tightly together in her lap, and there was a quiver in the delicate throat, so white against her black dress.

‘It was wonderfully fortunate that the truth should have come out just when it did. And to think that only another day and it would have been too late.’

He was bending towards her, and his voice was low and tender. He was trying to make her raise her eyes to his. They had been so ready to meet his, with their innocently bold love, last year—only last year! But now she kept them rigidly fixed on those twisting fingers in her lap.

‘I don’t think you quite understand,’ she said, and her voice was so low that he could hardly catch the words.

‘Yes, I do; my mother has been telling me.’

‘That I am going to marry Mark?’

‘No; that your marriage was mercifully prevented, and that he set you free.’

‘He had no power to do it. I am bound to him till I die.’

‘Bound by what?’

‘By love.’

‘Belle, it was me you loved.’

'Yes,' she answered very low, but slowly and distinctly, 'it was you I *loved* ;' and there was a slight emphasis on the last word that brought out the past tense. And then she raised her eyes and looked full into his with eyes full of tender regret and sweetness, but the innocent love of last year was no longer there.

CHAPTER XXV.

ONCE MORE.

All the aching of heart, the restless, unsatisfied longing,
All the dull, deep pain, and the constant anguish of patience.

LONGFELLOW.

HAVE you ever, my reader, played at any game at which your object was rather to lose than to gain — playing, perhaps, with children or with some one who loses his temper unless he wins? It is wonderful not only what undesired luck attends every stroke, but what marvellous skill you exhibit. If your life depended on it you could not play half as well, and the carelessness with which you play is only set down to ‘side,’ and a wish to show off how easily you can do it.

So it was with Mark Hastings in that wearisome game of life for which he had no heart or relish.

In old days, when he would have given his very heart’s blood to win even a small addition to his income, hopeless want of success attended all his efforts; but now, when the height of his ambition was just to keep clear of starving, and he was not very keen even about that, the path of prosperity seemed to open before him in all directions.

When you read of all the ventures in life of young men with health and hope and enterprise, and friends, and perhaps money too, to back them, and of the miserable failures many of them make of it, it seems almost unbelievable that Mark, without any of these aids and advantages, landing at Quebec almost penniless — the poor little sum intended for his honeymoon having been just sufficient to pay his steerage fare out — should have immediately found work, and that remunerative work, and have made friends, and those influential friends.

It seemed just because he took no manner of pains about it, would hardly cross the road or hold out his hand to get it, altogether kept aloof from the push and struggle and wild competition, that good fortune came to seek him out, and put her gifts into his half-unwilling hands.

If he had been a gambler he might, with his unflinching luck, have made one of those fabulous fortunes we read of ; but his father's dead face would never allow him to stake a farthing. So he did not jump straight into a million, but it was like Jacob in his service for Laban : everything he had to do with prospered, both for himself and his employers, and as he had no extravagant tastes and lived in the plainest manner, he soon began to find himself with money laid by.

It was the same with his investments ; he cared so little how they turned out or whether they brought in large dividends or small. It would not have cost him a night's rest if all the companies in which he held shares had smashed up and he had lost capital and

interest at one fell swoop. But no misfortunes happened to those companies ; they prospered and increased, and paid fat dividends to this thankless, careless shareholder.

If he was sparing in what he spent on himself, he was recklessly extravagant in helping other people, lending to hopeless scapegraces whose promises no one believed, and who certainly did not believe in them themselves. And here again the same good fortune attended him, for in more than one instance his help was the turning-point in the neer-do-weel's career, checked him in the easy descent, set him on his feet with his face and an impulse in the right direction ; and one of them at any rate came, after Mark had forgotten all about the transaction, to repay his debt a hundred-fold, as far as Mark would allow of it, and carried his gratitude for this silent, undemonstrative benefactor to his grave.

Well, perhaps in that fair old English home across the sea, which he thought of and dreamed of and prayed for so constantly, there might be little children growing up, little dark maidens such as one who used to play under the old apple-tree, where now, he concluded, Tom and Rose's plentiful offspring pervaded the place ; and if this money of his, almost in spite of himself, grew and increased, it might some day go to another little, dark-eyed Belle from an unknown friend, and perhaps her mother might guess who sent it.

He cut himself entirely off from all home news, avoiding even English papers, or English news in

American ones, and not even when a frenzy of fear seized him of death or trouble molesting the sweet peace of that life he loved, would he allow himself to take any means for reassuring himself. No. When he left Duckington he died, and his ghost should not go back, even for its own satisfaction, to terrify and disturb the living ; and in time the longing would wear out into dull apathy, or at any rate would be washed out by the chill waters of death. But the apathy did not seem to come, though ten years had passed over his head and left it white ; and those weary feet of his did not come perceptibly nearer to the deep river, though other happier wayfarers come to its brink sometimes all too soon. But one day the longing came over him with such irresistible power that he took his passage in the next steamer for Liverpool and started for home.

Just to know and make sure that she was happy, that all was going well with her ; just to see the old places once more, pace the streets, look up at the windows, perhaps press the yellow notes of the old organ (he had not touched one since he left England), perhaps to go along the Poundley road, past the Lodge to where the house could be seen, and watch the lights in the upper windows come out.

No one need, or more likely would, recognize him, with his white hair ; and he would not try to see her, who, he thought, might know him in spite of all the change in him. And then he would come back and live out his life as best he could, feeding on the

memory of home and quieted by the assurance of her happiness.

More than once on the journey his courage failed him, or rather perhaps his previous resolution never to return reasserted itself, and when he reached Liverpool he had almost resolved to go back immediately, had not some trifling delay prevented him. And again, when he reached Sturminster, the junction for Duckington, he stopped there, resolved to go no farther.

But the following evening he found himself getting out at Duckington station. It all looked so wonderfully familiar — the bookstall and the advertisements and the porters, and the station dog pacing sedately up and down with his collecting-box strapped on his back. Mark could have believed that all those ten dragging years were a dream passed in a nap on his way back from Bristol, and a yawn and a rub to his eyes would dissipate it, and he would just pick up his bag and go off to Mr. Huxley's with the papers he had brought from Bristol, and then home to the old house to tea.

“ ‘George,’ sir, or ‘Are and ’Ounds?’ ” said the porter, with the same old absence of *h*'s that used to amuse Mr. Caxton's pupils so acutely, but with the respectful tone induced by the expectation of a tip which was unknown to the impecunious Mark Hastings of those days.

It was six o'clock and October, so the gas was lighted in the streets as Mark rattled along in the ‘George’ omnibus, peering out curiously at the houses on either side, and at the few passers-by in the streets,

reading the names over the shops with an eagerness quite amusing to a Jewish commercial traveller who was sharing the omnibus.

'Stranger in these parts, sir?' he said at last.
'Sleepy old place this; nothing stirring. There ain't no changes here from one year's end to another.'

But Mark had noticed a dozen or more between the station and the 'George.'

A new waiter at the 'George,' to whom Mark gave his order for dinner, with an odd feeling of reckless extravagance, surviving from those old days when a chop at the 'George' was an unheard-of self-indulgence.

He remembered the chambermaid, harder and more frowsy than in the old days when Mr. Caxton's oaves used to call her 'Polly,' and she would bridle and toss and bid them go along. She looked at him, too, with a half-recognition, which faded off into indifference.

He wondered if the 'George' had always been so small and stuffy and fly-blown, and if those commercial travellers' packs had stood blocking up the entrance all these years since he broke his shins over them in his boyhood.

As he sat at his solitary dinner in the stale-smelling coffee-room, he asked the waiter if Mr. Caxton was still living there, and he paused reflectively with the potato-dish in his hand.

'Caxton? No, sir; I don't seem to recall the name. But I'm a stranger in these parts, sir. Perhaps the young lady at the bar may know.'

And with the cheese he brought back the informa-

tion. ‘ You was asking for Mr. Caxton, sir. He ’ve been dead these five years and more. Much respected, Miss Jones says.’

‘ Oh,’ said Mark, with a sort of Rip Van Winkle feeling of coming back to a place where all the old landmarks were swept away. ‘ Can you tell me who is living at the manor house now?’

‘ Yes ; sir. Lady Haviland, sir.’

‘ Lady Haviland ?’

‘ Yes, the dowager lady, sir. She took the house when Sir Gerald married.’

‘ Ah !’ Mark took up the paper to protect himself against further information, but the waiter had imbibed a good many facts from Miss Jones, which he was anxious to impart.

‘ The present Lady Haviland has a deal of money, Miss Jones says. I believe she came from your country, sir,’ he added, with a memory of the labels on Mark’s portmanteau. ‘ Leastways I understood as she was an American lady.’

‘ I think not,’ said Mark, curtly.

‘ Perhaps you know her ladyship? An uncommonly nice-spoken, handsome-looking lady. She was calling here this afternoon about some parcel as should have been sent on to Poundley, and she stood just where you ’re sitting now, sir, talking as affable as anything.— Bread, sir? Yes, sir.’

As Mark went out after his dinner he asked if Dr. Mainwaring was still alive.

No ; he also had joined the majority some time since.

‘Dr. Brookes is the doctor here now as most people have. He lives the other end of the town, towards the “Hare and Hounds,” in one of the old houses right on the street there.’

‘Yes,’ said Mark; ‘opposite to Dr. Mainwaring’s old house?’

‘Yes, sir.’

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOME.

After a day of cloud and wind and rain,
Sometimes the setting sun breaks out again.

LONGFELLOW.

THERE was a slight, fine rain falling when Mark turned out into the High Street, where the shops were already mostly closed, and only here and there were groups of people, standing about at open doorways, enjoying a pipe and a gossip after the day's work, now the children were in bed; and some of these looked curiously at the solitary figure passing by, and one man identified him as the American gent who came by the evening train and put up at the 'George.'

He went first to the church, whose great dark outline was just discernible against the cloudy sky.

Even in the darkness he could find the latch of the gate; and he remembered its old trick of needing a little jerk to make it open. And he stood for some minutes in the porch, and felt as if he might be the boy Mark Hastings again, waiting for his organ lesson.

Then he lit a match and read the parish notices. Plainly a new vicar. A new hymn-book, and the

order of services very different, and the church-war-dens — why, one of them was a boy when Mark went away, and the other name was new to him.

He was quite glad when the match went out and the darkness closed over all these changes.

In the organist's old house there were lights, and the sound of a very squeaky violin which Mark felt indefinably must be disturbing to those quiet sleepers in the churchyard, whose number, even in the dark-ness, he could see had largely increased since his time.

He made his way from there to the manor house, and passed and repassed it lingeringly, recalling the good old man whose kindness and friendship he had so long repulsed, till that last deliriously happy fort-night, and to whose hands he had committed so precious a charge when he went away.

And he remembered, too, Miss Priscilla and her elaborate explanations of the greater convenience of the back-door to save her dignity in using the ser-vants' entrance.

The only light from the house was from the window in the hall, and Mark recalled how all the sitting-rooms lay to the other side, looking over the garden.

He had taken a last look, and was turning to go on, when the front-door opened, and he stepped aside under the shelter of a wall to avoid observation.

Some one was coming out, stopping on the thresh-old to speak to another within the house. A tall, slight figure in a long cloak, silhouetted against the

bright light behind. A small, well-set head, with hair more closely dressed than is the present fashion, and a small hat of very simple character. And he heard the voice he had been hungering and thirsting to hear — Belle's voice — saying in its bright, clear tone, 'It is hardly raining at all now, and I must make haste. Don't come to the door and catch cold. Good-night, dear. I will come to-morrow.'

And then the door shut and it was dark again, and he heard her run down the steps and walk briskly down the street.

There was no carriage waiting for her. She surely could not be walking out to Poundley at that hour, and alone! No, no; of course not! Rich ladies are taken better care of than that. Most likely the carriage was waiting for her not far off.

But he turned and followed at a distance, catching sight of her as she passed a lamp or an open door, and then losing sight of her again. She was taking the way to the old home, and he passed many of the remembered landmarks — Mr. Huxley's office, and other places he had meant to look at — without noticing them, so full was his heart of that slight figure on ahead with the fluttering cloak.

If Mark could have chosen how it would be pleasantest and best to see her, it would have been going so naturally and simply along the old way home, without any of the pomp and circumstance of wealth and position, just as she might have done years ago.

She turned into the old house, the door of which

opened so quickly at her knock that Mark was not near enough to overhear what was said to the servant who opened it. Well, she and the Mainwarings had always been good friends; and Rose was a kind, good creature; and it was just what he should have thought of Belle to keep good friends with all who had been kind to her in the old days of poverty.

No doubt the carriage would pick her up there, or perhaps it was put up in the doctor's stable. Anyhow, he would get another chance of seeing her when she left, and he would wait any time for that.

The house looked more trim and well kept than it used in old days; but no doubt Tom Brookes was making a good practice. As he passed the house he could see into the dining-room. The blinds were not drawn, and the windows, as I have said, were so directly on the street that everything was plainly visible to the passer-by, and the privacy of the family depended on the good feeling of the public.

But if it was a want of good feeling in Mark to stand and look in, it surely might be forgiven him, having known the room so well in old times, and now looking at it for the last time. Yes, there were many signs of the prosperity of the Brookes family. A trim parlor-maid, very different from the 'Lizas and Alices of old days, was laying a table for dinner, with an elegance of flowers and plate and glass that was surprising in the house even of a prosperous member

of the Mainwaring family. The well-trimmed hanging lamp from the ceiling and the bright little fire on the hearth showed curtains and carpet of a very different order to the threadbare articles that were in use in his day, but otherwise the furniture seemed the same ; and he remembered the old doctor's offer to take the furniture at a valuation, which he had scouted so cavalierly when it was made.

And then he noticed that the table was being laid for one person alone—for the doctor perhaps, detained later than the family meal by an urgent case, or for his wife in the doctor's absence. And again Mark wondered at the difference to the old régime at the Mainwarings', with the plentiful rough-and-ready meals at unconventional hours, without any formality about them.

He passed on along the street, and when he came back the maid was just pulling down the blind, but before the room was shut out of his sight he saw Belle come in.

She had taken off her cloak, and was in a simple, half evening-dress, with lace about the neck and wrists, and a knot of crimson ribbon here and there lighting the black.

She was standing at the head of the table, as if she were just going to take her place, and she was speaking to the maid and smiled as the blind came down and hid her face from his sight. That smile was something to carry back to America, and the memory of a face that did not look a day older to his wondering eyes.

Oh, surely, surely that must be an ideally happy marriage to leave her still so young and untroubled !

But what did it mean, her dining like this at the Brookes', and alone? He pondered it as he paced up and down, but no carriage came to the door, and the light shone through the blinds of the dining-room window, crossed now and then by the servant's shadow; and he could not make a guess at any possible explanation.

At last he made up his mind to knock at the door and inquire for Dr. Brookes, making some excuse for not seeing him if he proved to be at home.

'Dr. Brookes? Oh, no, sir; he lives at the house opposite, where you see the red lamp.'

And then Mark saw what had been evident all the time — the red lamp burning and the brass plate on the door bearing the name of Dr. Brookes instead of Dr. Mainwaring.

'I beg your pardon,' he said and turned away, and the door closed, shutting in the light that had sprung out as if in welcome to this poor, lonely wayfarer who stood now in darkness and solitude outside.

'Good-bye, little Belle,' he said softly as he turned to wend his way into the great, cruel, empty world.

But the next moment the door opened again, and Belle herself stood there.

'Mark!' she cried. 'Mark! I know it is you — you, come home at last. Come in, love, come in.'

And she had his hands in hers, and was drawing him in out of the darkness and loneliness and cold, into the light and love and warmth of home.



And she had his hands in hers, and was drawing him in out of the darkness
and loneliness and cold. — *Page 234.*

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He had been so starved of love all his life, at any rate of any demonstration of love, and for the last ten years love had been set so hopelessly far away, infinitely farther than all those miles of tossing Atlantic waves or broad meadows and woodland across which his heart used to yearn for all he loved best, that now, in this sudden and bewildering surprise, he broke down utterly, and it was Belle's part to lead him in and soothe and comfort him ; and he could do nothing at first but sob, great, painful, convulsive sobs, and hold her hands to the heart that seemed as if it must burst with the flood of unutterable joy.

'I knew you would come back at last,' she said.

She had drawn his head to rest on her shoulder, and had smoothed the white hair away from his forehead, and kissed the lines time and trouble had drawn there.

'And if you had not come for fifty years, you would still have found me waiting for you here if I had lived.'

'But it was Gerald Haviland you loved.'

'That was what he told me after you had gone away.'

'And you ?'

'I told him then that it was in the past tense, and now it seems so very much in the past that I sometimes wonder if it really could have been ever in the present at all. Poor Gerald ! he is very happy with his nice little American wife and her dollars. She thinks he has not his equal, but I never could agree with her about that. And she thinks she is the

luckiest girl in the world, but I know better this evening. Mark,' she went on presently, 'that muslin dress of mine will look dreadfully old-fashioned and ridiculous, but I 'm quite resolved to wear it on my wedding day all the same.'

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THE END.

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